

ASCENDANCE OF A BOOKWORM

I'll do anything to
become a librarian!

Part 5 Avatar of a Goddess Vol.6

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Illustrator: **You Shiina**







Cast of Characters

Summary of Part Four:

At the Royal Academy, Rozemyne has become both a problem child and a top-ranking student. She took ownership of the library's magic tools through a blessing, played a greater role against a problem duchy, advised royalty on matters of romance, defeated a Darkness fey beast, and healed the Ehrenfest gathering spot, among so many other things. Meanwhile, at the guidance of the Sovereign knight commander, who knows that Ferdinand is a seed of Adalgisa, the king orders Ferdinand to leave Ehrenfest and marry into another duchy. Now, Ferdinand must endure a new life in Ahrensbach.



Wilfried

Sylvester's son, Rozemyne's older brother, and a third-year.



Rozemyne

The protagonist. She grew a little and now looks about nine, but she's the same on the inside and will do anything to read books. A third-year.

Ehrenfest's Archducal Family



Sylvester

The archduke of Ehrenfest. He adopted Rozemyne, making him her adoptive father.



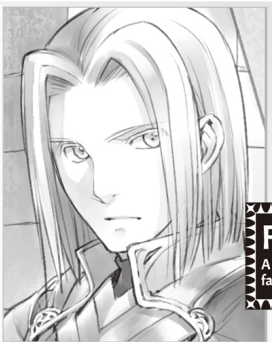
Florencia

Sylvester's wife and the mother of his three children. Rozemyne's adoptive mother.



Charlotte

Sylvester's daughter, Rozemyne's little sister, and a second-year.



Melchior

Sylvester's son. Rozemyne's little brother.

Bonifatius

Sylvester's uncle, Karstedt's father, and Rozemyne's grandfather.

Ferdinand

A member of the Ehrenfest archducal family. Sent to Ahrensbach by royal decree.

Rozemyne's Retainers



Otilie

Head attendant.
Hartmut's mother.



Lieseleta

Angelica's little sister
and a medattendant.



Gretia

A fourth-year apprentice
medattendant. Gave her
name.



Hartmut

An archscholar and the
new High Priest. Otilie's
son.



Clarissa

An archscholar.
Engaged to Hartmut.



Roderick

A third-year apprentice
medscholar. Gave his
name.



Philine

A third-year apprentice
layscholar.



Cornelius

Karstedt's son and an
archknight.



Leonore

An archknight.
Engaged to Cornelius.



Angelica

Lieseleta's older sister
and a medknight.



Matthias

A fifth-year apprentice
medknight. Gave his
name.



Laurenz

A fourth-year apprentice
medknight. Gave his
name.



Judithe

A fourth-year apprentice
medknight.



Damuel

A layknight.

Royal Academy Retainers

Brunhilde

.....A fifth-year apprentice archattendant. Sylvester's fiancée.

Muriella

.....A fifth-year apprentice medscholar. Gave her name to Elvira.

Theodore

.....A first-year apprentice medknight. Serves only in the Royal Academy.

Ehrenfest's Nobility

Rihyarda.....Sylvester's archattendant.
Karstedt.....Ehrenfest's knight commander. Rozemyne's noble father.
Elvira.....Karstedt's first wife. Rozemyne's noble mother.
Lamprecht.....An archknight serving Wilfried. Karstedt's son.
Aurelia.....Lamprecht's first wife.
Siegrecht.....Lamprecht's son.
Trudeliede.....Karstedt's second wife.
Nikolaus.....Karstedt and Trudeliede's son. An apprentice blue priest.
Traugott.....An apprentice archknight. Bonifatius's grandson.
Leberecht.....Florencia's archscholar. Hartmut's father.
Ignaz.....An apprentice archscholar serving Wilfried.
Thorsten.....An archscholar serving Wilfried.
Barthold.....An apprentice medscholar serving Wilfried.
Oswald.....Wilfried's former head attendant.
Bertilde.....Brunhilde's little sister. A candidate for being Rozemyne's retainer.
Brigitte.....A mednoble from Ilagner. Rozemyne's former retainer.
Lasfam.....Ferdinand's layattendant.
Eckhart.....Ferdinand's guard knight. Karstedt's son.
Justus.....Ferdinand's attendant and scholar. Rihyarda's son.
Veronica.....Sylvester's mother. Currently detained.

Nobles from Other Duchies

Trauerqual.....The king. Carries the title of Zent.
Sigiswald.....The Sovereignty's first prince.
Adolphine.....Sigiswald's first wife.
Anastasius.....The Sovereignty's second prince.
Eglantine.....Anastasius's first wife.
Hortensia.....An archlibrarian of the Royal Academy.
Hannelore.....A third-year archduke candidate from Dunkelfelger.
Georgine.....Ahrensbach's first wife. Sylvester's older sister.
Detlinde.....A member of the Ahrensbach archducal family. Georgine's daughter.
Letizia.....A member of the Ahrensbach archducal family.
Martina.....Detlinde's archattendant.

Temple Associates

Fran.....In charge of the High Bishop's chambers.
Zahm.....In charge of the High Bishop's chambers.
Monika.....A cook who helps in the High Bishop's chambers.
Nicola.....A cook who helps in the High Bishop's chambers.
Gil.....In charge of the workshop.
Fritz.....In charge of the workshop.
Wilma.....In charge of the orphanage.
Delia.....An apprentice gray shrine maiden. Dirk's older sister.
Dirk.....An orphan. Delia's little brother.
Konrad.....An orphan. Philine's little brother.
Bertram.....An orphan. Laurenz's little brother.
Kampfner.....A blue priest.
Frietack.....A blue priest.

Rozemyne's Personnel

Ella.....Personal chef.
Hugo.....Personal chef.
Rosina.....Personal musician.

Gutenbergs

Benno.....Head of the Plantin Company.
Mark.....Benno's right-hand man.
Lutz.....A leherl of the Plantin Company.
Damian.....A lehang of the Plantin Company.
Ingo.....Foreman of a carpentry workshop.
Dimo.....Leherl of a carpentry workshop. Ingo's disciple.
Zack.....A leherl smith. Comes up with ideas.
Johann.....A leherl smith. Turns ideas into reality.
Danilo.....A leherl smith. Johann's apprentice.
Josef.....Leherl of an ink workshop. Heidi's husband.
Heidi.....Leherl of an ink workshop. Josef's wife.
Horace.....Leherl of an ink workshop. Josef's disciple.

Lower City Associates

Corinna.....A seamstress for the Gilberta Company.
Gunther.....Myne's dad.
Effa.....Myne's mom and personal seamstress.
Tuuli.....Myne's older sister and personal hairpin craftswoman.
Kamil.....Myne's little brother.
Deid.....Lutz's dad.
Karla.....Lutz's mom.
Ralph.....Lutz's older brother.

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Prologue

“Well, the Archduke Conference is finally over. How are you holding up, Florencia?”

Florencia looked down at her belly. It was now a little noticeable, no matter how carefully she dressed to hide it. The truth was that she wanted to rest, but there were too many decisions to be made before they returned to Ehrenfest.

“I am fine for now,” she said. “We have much to discuss, do we not? I will visit your chambers once I am changed.”

This year’s Archduke Conference had involved one shocking development after another. A divine instrument had turned into the night sky during the Starbind Ceremony. The nobles of other duchies had banded together to get Rozemyne sent to the Sovereign temple. Rozemyne had discovered that she was a Zent candidate, which had resulted in several meetings with the royal family. Then everyone had participated in a second Dedication Ritual and restored their respective duchies’ gathering spots. Never before had any of these things happened during a conference, so there was plenty that needed to be worked out before the archducal couple could return home.

I never thought Wilfried and Rozemyne’s engagement would be canceled like this...

Once the news spread that Wilfried was no longer going to marry Rozemyne, he would cease to be secure in his position as the next Aub Ehrenfest. Would he be overjoyed to hear this, given his own recent pushes to end their engagement? And then there was Charlotte, who had been forced out of the archducal candidacy as a result of the betrothal. How would she react after having shed so many tears? Would she rejoice that the path once lost to her could now be forged anew? Or would she sob for her brother by blood, who would now need to endure the same merciless pain? Florencia could not tell.

Melchior was currently being educated to play an assisting role within the archducal family—a necessary course of action, at least

before recent developments, to ensure that he would not oppose Wilfried. He was young enough that it might have been possible to train him as the next archduke, but it had already been decided that he would serve as the next High Bishop. Florencia worried that, like Rozemyne, he would end up lacking critical socializing skills or common sense as a noble.

But I am most worried about Wilfried.

Being the eldest son of an archducal family was a dangerous position, and this was especially true for Wilfried. He had already enjoyed a long stretch as the duchy's next archduke and achieved grades impressive enough for him to have been recognized as an honor student at the Royal Academy. He was also trusting to a fault, which made it easy for others to sway him. He had already been led astray once, and if such a thing happened again, there was a genuine risk that it would end with his assassination. If not that, perhaps he would join Veronica in the Ivory Tower, reduced to nothing more than a source of mana. At best—and most likely of all—he would merely be removed from the archducal family.

We finally managed to remove Oswald from his position, and yet...

The engagement between Wilfried and Rozemyne had emboldened the former head attendant. Believing that his lord was now guaranteed to become the next archduke, he had shamelessly used Veronica's methods to further his own interests. Florencia had opposed the man's distasteful conduct, but removing him had not been her call to make. It was up to Wilfried to decide whether he would take action, but no matter how much his mother had tried to convince him to change his retainers, he had refused. In his words, he had seen no reason to abandon those who had stayed with and supported him when he was at risk of being disinherited.

Only through the purge had the archducal couple finally secured enough leverage to force Oswald from his role, but their own retinues had suffered as well. So dire was their situation that they were having to share retainers between themselves, leaving them without any manpower to spare for their son. Florencia had planned to give him one of her retainers after the Archduke Conference, when they had hoped to be in a more favorable position, but then his engagement had been abruptly canceled.

Truly, what is there to do?

To make matters worse, during the conference, it had come to light through one of his guard knights that Wilfried was still

secretly in contact with Oswald. Barthold, a name-sworn retainer of the young lord, was serving as their intermediary.

One problem after another... The timing is so unfortunate that I could almost resent the gods.

It was problematic for Wilfried, a member of the archducal family, to remain so close with a former retainer. It suggested that he knew not why Oswald was relieved of duty to begin with, and their continued relationship was very likely to develop into an unnecessary incident.

He will need to be educated on how to deal with his retainers and maintain an appropriate distance from them. I shall consult Leberecht.

“Should you not be resting, Lady Florencia?”

“I appreciate your concern, but I must settle various matters with the aub before we return to Ehrenfest. You all may continue to prepare for our departure.”

After returning to her room and changing into looser attire, Florencia headed to Sylvester’s chambers. They sat patiently as their attendants served them tea; then, they sent their retainers to wait behind screens and each picked up a sound-blocking magic tool. Keeping the results of the Archduke Conference private was of the utmost importance.

“Sheesh. I still can’t get over what happened...” Sylvester said, moving to join his wife on the couch. His archducal persona had given way to his true emotions, frown and all. “Who’d have thought that Rozemyne was a Zent candidate and that the king would end up adopting her like this?”

The Grutrissheit was of critical importance to anyone who wished to rule Yurgenschmidt. Without it, internal borders could not be redrawn, deposed duchies could not be reformed with new foundations, and the country gates could not be opened or closed. That was why the Sovereign temple refused to accept Trauerqual as the Zent, why those who shared their opinion stirred rebellion, and why tensions had not eased even ten-some years after the civil war.

Florencia nodded in agreement. “Under normal circumstances, it would have been an honor for the royal family to seek an archduke candidate from Ehrenfest, a middle duchy. Still, if our assistance is required to find the Grutrissheit, we are duty bound to provide it.”

Now that Ehrenfest was being treated as a winner of the country’s civil war, Florencia had come to realize just how much

the victorious duchies were doing to keep Yurgenschmidt afloat. Deposed territories had been divided among the greater duchies, who were having to dump raw mana into their lands—a terribly inefficient process made necessary by the missing Grutrissheit, which was required to manage the country’s foundations. It would suffice over a short period, but the burden it imposed would only increase. At the same time, there were reports that the portion of Old Werkestock under Ahrensbach’s control was so devoid of mana that it was facing enormous difficulties.

She continued, “And during these tough times when even greater duchies are feeling the strain, one of the royal palace’s magic tools crumbled to dust. We can deduce as members of an archducal family that the tool must have been close to a foundation, which explains why the royal family feels so much pressure right now.”

The royals had admitted this in confidence during their discussion about adopting Rozemyne. They had assumed that they would be able to meet the country’s mana requirements without the Grutrissheit, but as the days passed, their misjudgment was being thrust in their faces. Obtaining it was crucial; otherwise, it would only be a matter of time before Yurgenschmidt faced complete and utter destruction.

A decade had passed without anyone finding even a trace of the Grutrissheit. That, coupled with the time pressure, explained why the royal family was grasping so desperately at this lone opportunity. If, as they had said, Rozemyne truly was the closest Zent candidate to obtaining the Grutrissheit, then why would they not have scrambled to adopt her? Florencia believed that the adoption would have been inevitable even if Rozemyne had been due to become the next Aub Ehrenfest.

“However, in our current state, we cannot rejoice,” Florencia said. “It brings me great shame as both Rozemyne’s adoptive mother and an archducal family member serving royalty that we cannot send her off with a smile, and without needing to make conditions.” She took a sip of her tea, then sighed; her home duchy of Frenbeltaag was also suffering immensely for the lack of a Grutrissheit. Most of the rebelling nobles were from the deposed duchies, and they were only daring to act in the first place because, without their aubs, their medals could not be used to distribute proper punishment.

“We really don’t want Rozemyne to leave Ehrenfest right now,” Sylvester said.

“Indeed. Were we not in our current predicament, she would not have shown so much resistance and applied so many conditions. Yet she had no choice...” Florencia giggled, then added, “Prince Sigiswald must have been quite surprised when he attempted to negotiate with her directly.”

A normal archduke candidate would have understood the problems that Yurgenschmidt was facing and determined that assisting the royal family was the greatest priority for both their home and the country at large. They would have intuitively agreed to put aside their own duchy’s problems, as securing the Grutrissheit would improve things for everyone.

Of course, Rozemyne was anything but a normal archduke candidate. She had been raised in Ehrenfest, a middle duchy that had mostly avoided the chaos of the civil war—and in its temple, no less. Her understanding of the royal family and of the other duchies’ suffering was minimal, she prioritized her own duchy above all others, and she was reluctant to help freely, even going as far as to negotiate the terms of her adoption. The royal family could not be blamed for their surprise.

At the same time, however, Rozemyne’s efforts had been extremely beneficial to Ehrenfest. If not for her suggestions, Florencia would never have thought to attach conditions to the adoption.

“I know there’s no helping it,” Sylvester said, “but it hurts my head just trying to imagine the repercussions this is going to have. If only this whole mess had happened last year instead. She could have negotiated to cancel Ferdinand’s engagement rather than merely save him from punishment...”

“Indeed. And if not for that engagement, Rozemyne would surely have been more compliant with the royal family. Everything would have proceeded a lot more smoothly if only Lord Ferdinand had stayed in Ehrenfest until the Archduke Conference, as was initially the plan, and not been summoned to Ahrensbach so early.”

Indeed, had his departure for Ahrensbach not been brought forward to the end of autumn, he would not have been so involved in the duchy’s administration, nor would it have been a problem to delay his Starbinding. In turn, his lack of an official tie to Detlinde would have meant there was zero threat of him being punished by

association, which would have put Rozemyne more at ease. Ehrenfest would have been afforded a bit more leeway when dealing with its handovers, and the loose ends of the purge would have been tied up more neatly.

Not to mention, it would have delayed all this troublesome behavior from Wilfried.

No sooner had spring arrived than he had abruptly started to view Rozemyne's compassion for Ferdinand as a problem, spurring him to protest and commit acts of defiance. This had always been bound to happen, but if everything had gone according to the original schedule, it wouldn't have been happening *now*. His engagement to Rozemyne could have been canceled at a more peaceful time, rather than while his relationship with her was so twisted.

"Why must everything be so difficult?" Florencia asked with a sigh. But before she could say anything else, she felt Sylvester's hand tenderly stroke her back. As her body relaxed and the tension she was feeling started to dissipate, she turned to her loving husband and reached out to caress his face. He looked so exhausted. It was becoming harder to find the time for these acts of affection, but that just made them all the more valuable.

"I already suspected this, but the recent incidents have made me certain," Florencia said. "Rozemyne's focus truly is too narrow for her to be the king's adopted daughter."

"You think so?"

"If the country's foundation were to crumble, neither Ehrenfest nor Lord Ferdinand in Ahrensbach would survive. An archducal family member soon to be in a position of leadership must be impartial and work toward whatever future will produce the fewest casualties. Rozemyne is the opposite; she makes her decisions based on emotions and personal preferences, does she not? Wilfried is much the same. In this regard, they are both far too immature for their age."

Both had obtained good grades at the Royal Academy, but their fractured education as archducal family members was clear to see. One had been raised by Veronica, while the other had grown up in the temple. It seemed that one's early education had an even greater impact than Florencia had ever assumed.

"Yeah, spending all that time in the temple and then those years in a jureve hasn't done much for Rozemyne's common sense,"

Sylvester agreed. “She can keep up appearances, but you can just tell that she’s fundamentally different from the rest of us. I’m told she prioritizes the things she wants to do and puts off whatever doesn’t interest her.”

She was always refusing to embroider, despite it being an essential skill for any decent noblewoman. Florencia knew that much because of the reports she had received from her retainers.

“That said,” Sylvester continued, “I don’t think she’s narrow-minded or anything like that; she just has a tendency to focus on the people she cares about. That’s why she’s more concerned about the commoners she knew from a young age than the well-being of any noble. It’s also why she’s more concerned about her former guardian, Ferdinand, than her fiancé, Wilfried, and why she’s more invested in Ehrenfest’s problems than Yurgenschmidt’s. She’ll do everything she can within her sphere of influence but doesn’t get involved in anything beyond that.”

Florencia suspected that he was right; Sylvester knew Rozemyne better than she did, and what he had said seemed to add up. Sometimes, Rozemyne would act quickly enough to leave even adults speechless, and exploit even the briefest windows of opportunity to their fullest. But on other occasions, her understanding of the world was worse than that of a pre-baptismal child. Her perspective truly was twisted.

Sylvester paused in thought. “You know, by the same logic... if we can get her invested in the royal family and the Sovereignty after her adoption, she’ll probably start caring about Yurgenschmidt above all else. We should think about putting something she really values in the Sovereignty.”

“As nice as that might be, do you truly believe she would develop such a connection to the Sovereignty? On the one hand, her lack of noble common sense has benefited the royal family up until now...” No other noble would have managed to unite Eglantine and Anastasius, nor would they have come up with—much less suggested—the idea to gather mana by holding a Dedication Ritual at the Royal Academy. Those feats had only been made possible by Rozemyne’s peculiar common sense. “But on the other, once she moves, her lack of education will surely be seen as a blight. Long have I wished to do something about it, but she is so reluctant to visit the castle that my options are limited.”

As a mother, Florencia had used dinners, tea parties, and other

such occasions to communicate with and educate her children. Rozemyne rarely spent much time in the castle, though, so she was often absent from such gatherings. She barely socialized with other nobles to begin with, so what would normally have developed naturally had not developed at all.

Florencia continued, "It might be tempting to assume that the next year will offer us an opportunity to improve the situation, but we can expect to see her in the castle even less often now that she is preparing for her move and the handover."

Florencia had previously said that she wished to teach Rozemyne about being a first wife, but the idea had quickly been shelved. Rozemyne's temple work came first, she was told; there would be plenty of time to focus on her education in the future, and there were far more pressing matters to attend to. But now Florencia was just as busy. Once she gave birth, nursing the baby would be her top priority.

"Rozemyne has been meeting with Elvira in the temple," Florencia mused, "and there is nothing forbidding her from visiting her home. I expect her true mother has been educating her on how to be a noblewoman, but I worry that her teachings will not be enough; archnobles and archducal family members live in fundamentally different worlds."

Sylvester put on a half-smile and waved a hand as if to dismiss his wife's concerns. "Rozemyne will manage on her own. That force of nature has made it this far, after all. She's so determined to realize her desires that she even negotiated with the royal family. And whenever she's faced with a problem that seems impossible, she swiftly solves it using some incomprehensible approach or another. I'm not that worried."

Florencia placed a hand on her forehead. "You are as optimistic as always—or as negligent, I should say."

"We don't have time to educate Rozemyne. Even if we did, I doubt we'd make much progress with her. It seems pretty obvious that we should instead devote our resources to interduchy relations and fixing Ehrenfest's internal problems. I really mean it when I say that the impact of this conference is going to be enormous. Rozemyne is no ordinary archduke candidate; thinking about all the handover work we'll need to do makes my head hurt."

"The next year will give us enough time to deal with that. Was that not what Rozemyne concluded during her negotiation with the

royal family?"

Rozemyne was similarly focused on how her move would impact Ehrenfest. She likely already had a plan for how to pass on her work to others.

"Melchior is starting to take over in the temple, and Elvira is in charge of the printing industry. She may leave business with the lower city to her retainers, with Brunhilde taking the lead. I would also advise delegating work to Wilfried, even though his current relationship with Rozemyne might complicate things."

"Not happening. If we involve him, no way will things go smoothly. His retainers have too much bad blood with Rozemyne's. I can already see feuds popping up all over the place."

Florencia understood that disputes between retainers would inconvenience everyone involved, but still—for the sake of his future, Wilfried needed to take over at least some of Rozemyne's work.

"At the very least," she said, "could we not entrust something to Charlotte? She is on good terms with Rozemyne, so I would not expect them to butt heads." Delegating work to Charlotte would make it easier for Wilfried to get involved later.

"Nah, we need Charlotte to assist you with your work for at least half a year after your delivery. And given that we only have a year before Rozemyne leaves, there just won't be enough time."

"If only we could ask Brunhilde to support me instead... but she is underage and still just your fiancée," Florencia lamented. It would be unfeasible to ask Brunhilde to assist with the work of a first wife when she had yet to formally become a member of the archducal family. Charlotte, on the other hand, would be able to enter Florencia's chambers even after the birth, meaning she would be able to ask questions if she needed to.

But even knowing that, Florencia could not help but worry for her son, who was now in the midst of a rebellious phase.

"What do you think Wilfried should do, then?" Florencia asked. They had planned to double down on his education after the Archduke Conference, but now that his engagement to Rozemyne was no more, his future position was of much greater concern.

"He will continue to support me. This whole mess is going to increase my workload, after all."

"Do you not think he would protest? His engagement being canceled means that he is no longer guaranteed to become the next

aub. It is easy to imagine he will start pouting or some such.”

It had not been long ago that Bonifatius had given up on Wilfried, who had refused to stop throwing tantrums—and recent reports from Ehrenfest suggested that the young lord’s attitude had not improved in the slightest. In fact, he seemed *glad* that his archducal education was being halted.

Florencia frowned, then heaved an uneasy sigh. In response, Sylvester pressed a finger against and started to massage her forehead.

“I won’t actually be giving him archduke work,” he said. “And while he’s no longer guaranteed to become the next aub, that doesn’t erase his responsibilities as an archducal family member. Not to mention, he’s been *asking* for his engagement with Rozemyne to be canceled. He won’t fight against getting what he wanted.”

Sylvester was trying to protect his son’s position by having him openly carry out his duties as an archducal family member—but how would the duchy’s nobles react? Now that his engagement was no more, Wilfried would need to bear the shame of a guaranteed archduke once again reduced to the status of a mere archduke candidate. One needed only to consider the situation surrounding Giebe Groschel to see how Ehrenfest would treat such an individual.

This would have been so much simpler if romance had actually bloomed between Wilfried and Rozemyne...

Had the two fallen in love, Rozemyne might have negotiated for Wilfried to accompany her to the Sovereignty as her fiancé, or wait until she found and relinquished the Grutrissheit, at which point she could return to Ehrenfest and marry him. Then, Florencia would never have needed to worry about her son’s future.

Instead, Wilfried was demanding that their engagement be canceled, even getting into shouting matches with his parents, while Rozemyne was emotionally detached from the whole affair. On top of everything else, the royal family wanted to keep Rozemyne in their care for the foreseeable future. Not a single person had wanted the engagement to continue.

“Do you think he can remain an archducal family member while being looked down on by the nobility?” Florencia asked.

“Protecting him is my duty as both his father and the archduke,” Sylvester said, then let out a short chuckle and placed a gentle hand on his wife’s belly. “Right now, all you need to think about is your delivery.”

Florencia found comfort in her husband's unfaltering confidence, but it also made her extremely worried. She knew his tendency to put on a brave face even when he was severely overexerting himself.

Sylvester continued, "The Leisegangs will oppose Rozemyne's move, but it's an honor to be adopted by the king. They won't be able to keep making a fuss once she's gone, in any case, and my engagement to Brunhilde should placate them well enough. It might take us a while, but we'll get everything under control."

The purge had dissolved the former Veronica faction—and now that its figurehead, Wilfried, was losing his position due to the canceled engagement, Sylvester didn't expect the Leisegangs to continue causing a stir for much longer. Florencia, however, was much less optimistic. Sylvester's position as the next aub had never faltered, whereas she, the daughter of a third wife, could easily have been demoted to an archnoble depending on where she married into. Their perspectives on archducal family members were entirely different.

I sincerely believe we should curb the power of the Leisegang elders before Rozemyne leaves. Something must be done so that Wilfried can remain in the archducal family even after his engagement has been canceled.

"No need to frown like that," Sylvester said. "I'm not fully convinced that things will go well either. But if we can keep Rozemyne's departure a secret, the Leisegangs won't be incited to action."

As it stood, the only ones who knew about Rozemyne's future adoption were Rozemyne herself, Ehrenfest's archducal couple, and those among the royal family who had participated in the discussion. Rozemyne's retainers and the nobles attending the conference might have been aware that Ehrenfest had received several royal summons, but they certainly wouldn't know why.

"I see," Florencia replied. "In that case, it would indeed serve us well to hide this revelation until Rozemyne must leave. Right now, we do not have strength to spare for keeping the nobles under control. But when it comes time for Rozemyne to move, we should already have given our baby the minimum amount of nursing it will require. I will then be able to move more freely."

"Yep. We'll commit to a vow of silence for now and tell individual retainers what's happening based on whether they're

needed for the handover.”

Those taking over duties would inevitably learn the truth, especially when Rozemyne started packing. And at that point, Florencia realized something.

“How do we intend to help Rozemyne with her preparations? I am unlikely to be able to move after the birth.”

Rozemyne had acted with Ehrenfest’s best interests in mind, so Florencia was determined to help her prepare, as both her mother and the archduke’s first wife. But that sense of duty was not enough; she knew from experience how useless she would be after giving birth and while looking after the baby.

“You won’t be expected to help, will you?” Sylvester asked. “Rozemyne has Elvira, her true mother. Leave the preparations to her. It’ll afford them greater secrecy than preparing in the castle, and I’m sure Rozemyne will feel more comfortable. I’ll tell her about this through Karstedt.”

Elvira was busy enough with the printing industry handover, so she had very little time on her hands already. Still, her love for her daughter was tremendously strong—Florencia knew that much. And Rozemyne would surely rather spend time with her true mother than her adoptive one.

Florencia nodded. “Of course. Elvira may be better suited to this work, given her relationship to Rozemyne’s retainers and the amount of time she has spent at the temple. I will simply let Rozemyne know that I am willing to provide as much help as I am able.” There was much that she needed to think about—preparing for Rozemyne’s departure, the impact of the canceled engagement, Ahrensbach’s funeral, her own delivery, the renovations in Groschel...

“Let us do our best together,” she murmured, affectionately stroking her belly.

Report on the Archduke Conference (Third Year)

“Welcome home, Sister.”

“Rozemyne! You’re back!”

As soon as I stepped through the teleporter, I was greeted by Charlotte, Bonifatius, and my retainers who had stayed at home. Melchior and Wilfried were present as well; I could see them toward the back of the room. We had returned to Ehrenfest in descending order of status, as always, so they were busy speaking with the archducal couple.

“Rozemyne, Charlotte, we’re going to have an archducal family meeting tomorrow afternoon,” Sylvester said casually upon noticing my arrival. “Take care not to be late.” His expression betrayed not even the slightest hint that we were to discuss my adoption by the king.

Moved to see him acting so much like an archduke, I gave a similarly casual smile and replied, “Understood.”

“Rest well today so that you arrive on time.”

After we watched Sylvester depart with Florencia to the main building’s living area, it was time for us to retire to our rooms in the northern building. The nobles still at the Royal Academy wouldn’t be able to teleport back until we were gone.

“Rozemyne, would *this* make it safe for me to escort you?” Bonifatius asked, then put his hand on his hip and offered me his arm to hold.

Leonore quickly intervened, looking troubled. “Please excuse me, Lord Bonifatius, but should Lady Rozemyne’s fiancé not escort her?”

“He said that he would allow me this rare opportunity to bond with my dear granddaughter.” He turned to Wilfried, seeking his confirmation.

“I did say that, yes. Lord Bonifatius wouldn’t even get a chance to escort Rozemyne for feasts and the like, so why not give him

this?”

“Do you not realize how much danger you’re putting her in?” Cornelius asked with a grimace. This earned him a heated response from Bonifatius.

“Cornelius, what are you saying?! She won’t have anything to fear as long as my hand stays put!”

Bonifatius’s attempts to be affectionate had endangered me countless times already. It made sense that my knights were so on guard, but he was puffing out his chest and refusing to back down.

“In that case, allow me to confirm that your hand won’t move,” Cornelius said, approaching him with Angelica. They wore the most severe expressions as they tugged, pushed, and even hung from his arm.

They’re being way too cautious! And while they’re being so serious, everyone else is trying not to laugh!

Melchior was an exception—he was looking on with envy—but Wilfried, Charlotte, and the others were barely managing to compose themselves.

“As has been demonstrated, his hand will not budge in the slightest,” Cornelius said, sounding defeated after a truly thorough investigation. “If you hold on here”—he gestured to Bonifatius’s wrist—“then you shouldn’t need to worry about your arm getting tired.”

I did as instructed; then we started toward my room. Bonifatius was being extra careful to match my pace, which might have made it look like he was escorting me if not for my especially small stature. Anyone who saw us would probably assume that I was hanging from his arm instead of holding on to it.

Come forth, Leidenschaft! I await the growth your divine protection shall grant me!

“Sister, how was your first Archduke Conference?” Charlotte asked. “I was terribly surprised when Lord Bonifatius informed me that you were going to stay not just for the first day’s Starbind Ceremony but for the Dedication Ritual at the end as well.”

“I was just as taken aback,” I said. “The royal family made their request while I was translating documents in the underground archive.”

The reality was that we had forced them to request it, but I didn’t mention that to Charlotte. Instead, I told a few innocent stories about what had occurred while I was translating with

Hannelore and the royal family. Charlotte and the others told me what I'd missed at home in return.

"We assisted Lord Bonifatius and performed Mana Replenishment," Charlotte explained. "Then, I memorized prayers with Wilfried and Melchior."

"Yeah, Melchior had to learn the prayer for the baptism ceremony, so we decided to join him," Wilfried added. "That's much more effective than practicing alone, right?"

Melchior's retainers had apparently been brought to tears by the amount of work that Hartmut was piling on them in the temple. So, Wilfried and Charlotte had volunteered to give their younger brother a hand with his prayers.

"Did it work?" I asked.

Melchior nodded. "I memorized the prayer for the baptism ceremony. And now I can perform Mana Replenishment without ending up unable to move!" After regularly offering his mana in the temple, he had quickly adjusted to supplying the foundation as well.

As we continued to discuss our everyday affairs, we eventually arrived at the northern building. "Grandfather," I said, "I thank you ever so much for escorting me."

"Indeed. Until dinner, then." He let out a heavy sigh of relief—I could guess that he had spent the entire journey focusing on his hand—then turned on his heel and went off, seeming exceptionally pleased with himself.

Upon returning to my room, I told the adult retainers who had accompanied me to the conference to rest in preparation for tomorrow's meeting. My underage retainers would attend to me in the meantime, which was fine for my knights and scholars, but Gretia would need to serve as my only attendant.

As I pondered what to do, Lieseleta stepped forward. "Lady Rozemyne, I shall remain as well. Gretia would struggle by herself."

"But Lieseleta..."

"I insist. Otilie accompanied you to the underground archive during the Archduke Conference, whereas I remained inactive in the dormitory."

Lieseleta had prepared tea, lunch, and the like, so she hadn't been *that* inactive. Still, I couldn't refuse her generosity and put so much pressure on Gretia—doing that would make me a terrible lady to them.

“In that case, please continue to serve me for a little while longer. I shall grant you two days of rest after tomorrow.”

“Understood.”

My adult guards returned to their homes or the knight dorms, and my two adult scholars went off with Otilie. Gretia and Liesele started putting away my luggage, while Philine and Roderick gave me a report on the current state of the temple. I also spent some time reading a few transcriptions.

I suppose we can have a full retainer meeting after tomorrow's gathering of the archducal family... Oh, I'll need to contact Brunhilde as well.

Over dinner, I received reports from everyone else who had remained in Ehrenfest. We would discuss the events of the Archduke Conference later.

It was the afternoon of the archducal family's meeting. Our retainers, the Knight's Order, and the high-ranking scholars would all gather with us, as per usual, but there was also going to be a new face in attendance: Melchior, even though he was still too young to enroll at the Royal Academy.

“I don't know why I was summoned,” he said.

“Must be an announcement that everyone needs to hear, no matter their age,” Wilfried ventured. “Rozemyne, you know what this is about, don't you?”

I did, but I sure wasn't going to be the one to tell them that the king was adopting me and that Melchior only had a year before he would need to take over as the High Bishop. I merely smiled and said, “All will be explained soon.”

Melchior nervously went to the meeting with his siblings on his either side, then took the seat marked for him. Each member of the archducal family was allowed to bring only one retainer of each kind, so I'd chosen Otilie as my attendant, Hartmut as my scholar, and Cornelius as my guard knight. The attendants and scholars would traditionally rush around to prepare the meeting before the archducal couple entered.

“Looks like everyone's here,” Sylvester said. “In that case, our report on the Archduke Conference shall now begin. Like last year, this is going to be a long one; there were a lot of major changes we will need to cover. Take care not to miss anything.”

As always, the meeting began with an announcement of the

duchy rankings. Sylvester said that the request we had made of Anastasius during the Interduchy Tournament had now been approved; in return for our rank remaining the same, we would start being treated as a victorious duchy.

“Aah... Well now...”

The quiet, relieved mutters from the adults went to show just how much they had struggled to keep up with our new position in the country.

“However,” Sylvester continued, “our new treatment brings with it a new burden. Of the greater duchies, you are all aware that Klassenberg is managing Old Zausengas, while Ahrensbach and Dunkelfelger are managing Old Werkestock, correct? Drewanchel is too far from any of the losing duchies, so it instead sent a wealth of archnobles to support the Sovereignty. This has put them in a unique situation where they have a large archducal family that can’t be moved to the Sovereignty but not nearly as many archnobles as usual.”

Hauchletzte and Gilessenmeyer had grown in power through their marriages with the royal family and were now bearing enormous burdens to return the favor. Now that Ehrenfest was transitioning from a neutral duchy to a winning one, we would need to provide our assistance as well.

“And what might that new burden be...?” one of the nobles asked nervously.

Sylvester looked across his audience. Then, once his eyes fell on me, he said, “I will announce it next year. But we also stand to gain from this arrangement. To quickly increase our noble population, the royal family has agreed that, for the next five years, anyone who marries an Ehrenfest noble must marry into our duchy. On top of that, we will receive forty magic tools for our newborns. Such are the counterbalances to the new burden we must carry.”

Aah, so he’s going to present my adoption as Ehrenfest’s burden.

The nobles began to fret; how great must the burden be for the duchy to have received such grand rewards? Still, Sylvester continued with his announcements. He revealed that Ferdinand’s Starbinding had been delayed, that a Dedication Ritual had been performed during the Archduke Conference, and that adults could now repeat the ritual for obtaining divine protections—all events related to divine ceremonies. He also mentioned that several members of the royal family had whirled and managed to trigger

the same magic circle as Detlinde, meaning she was no longer the only known Zent candidate.

From there, Sylvester went through the changes that would start being implemented during the Royal Academy's next academic year. This included the revision to when students would acquire their schtappes, the alterations being made to the lesson plans, and the decision that Ehrenfest and Klassenberg would start holding annual Dedication Rituals as joint research.

"Schtappes will once again be obtained during one's third year?" one noble asked. "Does this mean the noble population has recovered enough to afford us more leeway?"

"As it turns out, mana compression and divine protections change the quality of one's schtappe," Sylvester explained. "As a result of our joint research with Dunkelfelger, more and more students will obtain multiple divine protections. Adults will too, due to performing the Dedication Ritual at the Archduke Conference. Schtappes can only be obtained once; we should want them to be of the highest possible quality."

The nobles expressed their understanding.

"In short, changes to the Royal Academy's curriculum will become effective next year," Sylvester continued. Then he turned to me and said, "Will sweeping changes need to be made to the playroom in turn?"

The playroom primarily covered written lessons, so I doubted it. "Practical lessons are far more relevant to schtappes; therefore, I don't expect the Royal Academy's written lessons to be changed much at all. I believe we will simply need to consult Professor Moritz on what the lesson plan was when schtappes were obtained during one's third year."

"I see," Sylvester replied, nodding.

"And should we not consider the fact that our educational toys and picture-book bibles will raise most duchies' average grades in a few years' time?"

"Good point. We announced that we would start selling them at the same time that we gave some to the royal family. I think they received a lot of attention. Tell the Plantin Company to prepare them in large numbers."

"Printing is often done as winter handiwork, so I do not expect many more books to be made between now and summer. It would make more sense to order their mass production during the winter,

in preparation for when Groschel is ready and we can trade with more duchies.”

I had already informed Benno that our picture-book bibles were going to be sold countrywide. In response, he had told me that they were planning to implement some form of mass production. Still, there was little we could do to create more books before the summer, when the merchants were due to arrive.

“Hm. I told the other duchies that we would offer more trade spaces next year, so we need to make good on that.”

But how far along was Groschel with its preparations? I would need to ask when reporting the results of this meeting.

“Aub Ahrensbach’s funeral is being held at the start of summer,” Sylvester said, “and given Florencia’s situation, I will need to go alone. Be ready for that.” He had made it clear that, Georgine’s obsession with Ehrenfest aside, he was politically obligated to attend the funeral of a neighboring aub. He would also need to confirm that Ferdinand had received a hidden room, as promised.

I wish I could check as well, but...

I was going to be positively flooded with handover and preparation work, and two of my knights couldn’t be anywhere near Georgine. Plus, even if those hadn’t been issues, I didn’t have the stamina for such a long trip in the first place. I definitely wouldn’t receive permission to go to Ahrensbach.

Next, Sylvester made a few more announcements: the king had refused to host the Lanzenave princess, the trug-addled knights had been expelled from the Sovereign Order, and the interest in religious ceremonies was on the rise after everyone had experienced one for themselves.

“That is all,” Sylvester eventually concluded. “Now, clear the room. Only members of the archducal family are permitted to hear what I wish to say next. Even our retainers must leave.”

This was unprecedented. Not once had a post-meeting discussion required even our own retainers to step outside.

“Aub Ehrenfest?!”

“What is going on...?”

Some expressed their shock, but Sylvester merely waited in silence for everyone to leave.

“Lady Rozemyne...” my retainers said.

“The aub has spoken,” I replied. “Hartmut, Cornelius—you both

must leave as well.”

I ordered my entourage to go, then heaved a drawn-out sigh. The higher-ups and retainers took their leave, watching us all the while as if attempting to glean what was going on. Once they were gone, a heavy atmosphere overtook the room. Everyone was tense—except for the archducal couple and me, of course.

The Canceled Engagement and a Choice for the Future

“Everyone, come closer,” Sylvester said. Then, once we were all grouped together, he activated a sound-blocking magic tool around us. Just seeing the blue barrier made Melchior tremble; he wasn’t used to such extreme caution.

“Tell me what’s going on,” Bonifatius demanded. “What could require this much fuss?”

At last, Sylvester revealed the truth: “Rozemyne is going to be adopted by the king. She will then be engaged to Prince Sigiswald upon coming of age.”

Those who had not attended the Archduke Conference were stunned. Their eyes were like saucers, and their mouths flapped open and shut. Sylvester saw their expected confusion and continued in a quiet voice.

“We’ve been given a year to prepare for her move to the Sovereignty. For safety reasons, we won’t announce the adoption until it actually happens; we need the status quo to be maintained while we ready ourselves internally.”

Sylvester hadn’t mentioned anything to do with the Grutrissheit. We had decided to keep it all a secret, since we didn’t know whether I would obtain it or how it might be treated. Everyone involved with the handover process would only be told that the king was adopting me and that I would move to the Sovereignty in a year.

Charlotte likely understood the consequences of my adoption better than anyone. She frantically turned to look at Wilfried, who was completely frozen in place, his wide eyes seeming to bore into Sylvester.

“What about the temple...?” Melchior muttered; but he was drowned out by a crazed, booming roar from Bonifatius.

“Th-Think about what you’re saying, Sylvester! Rozemyne, adopted by the king?! Archduke candidates can’t be moved to the

Sovereignty!”

Sylvester slowly shook his head. “Rozemyne is my adopted daughter. Were I to disown her, she’d return to being an archnoble—and there’s no law against archnobles moving to the Sovereignty.”

“And you accepted that ridiculous demand?!”

“It was a royal decree. We managed to negotiate a few conditions, but refusing wasn’t an option.”

“Conditions?” Bonifatius’s eyes wandered the room for a moment before returning to Sylvester, no less harsh than before.

“I went through them just a moment ago, no?” Sylvester asked, clearly having expected such a reaction. “Five years of nobles marrying into Ehrenfest, and forty-some magic tools for our duchy’s newborns.”

“THAT’S ALL?!” Bonifatius thundered, leaping up out of his chair. “You sold Rozemyne to the Sovereignty for THAT?!”

Unfazed, Sylvester revealed the details he had omitted from the general announcement. “Our Sovereign nobles will be ordered to return home, Rozemyne’s adoption will count as the entirety of our burden, and Ferdinand will receive better living conditions *and* a guarantee that he won’t be punished for Detlinde’s crimes. Those were our terms. I’d say I did a much better job as aub than last year, when Ferdinand met with the king behind my back and agreed to leave without securing Ehrenfest anything of value.”

Bonifatius’s blue eyes shot wide open. “You asked them to help *Ferdinand*?! What benefit is there to that?! A few improvements for someone who doesn’t even belong to Ehrenfest anymore does *nothing* to make up for us losing Rozemyne. You’re supposed to be the aub, aren’t you? Did you really let your love for your brother get the better of you?!”

“They weren’t my requests,” Sylvester replied with a grimace. He then pointed at me and said, “They were hers.”

All eyes fell on me.

“H-Have you fallen in love with him?!” Bonifatius asked me, his jaw practically hitting the floor. “Did... Did something happen in the temple...?”

“Please do not get carried away. Is it really that strange to be worried about someone who is like family to you?” A wave of sadness washed over me. “After I move to the Sovereignty, will you forget about me the very next day? Will you stop calling me your

granddaughter and maintain that you have nothing to do with me?”

“Of course not! Even if your adoption to Sylvester is undone, you will always remain my granddaughter!”

“Would you call your love for me romantic, then?”

“Wh-What in the...?”

I smiled. “I worry for Ferdinand in the same way that you will worry for me when it comes time for me to move. My initial demand was for him to be returned to Ehrenfest, but the royal family refused.” I made sure to add that, if we *had* managed to get him back, it would have solved most of our problems, from the mana shortage to the Leisegangs to the handover of the temple work and the printing industry.

Bonifatius slumped his shoulders. “I realize now that I jumped to a bizarre conclusion. But are you not opposed to moving to the Sovereignty?”

“I am. It will require me to abandon my dear library and printing workshop and go somewhere far, far away from new books. Worse still, my future family is reluctant to prepare even a book room for me in my own home. I am nothing but unsatisfied.”

And that dissatisfaction was unlikely to go away anytime soon. I wanted to build a printing workshop in the Sovereignty as soon as possible, and improve the teleportation circles between Ehrenfest and the Sovereignty so that new books could be sent to me immediately.

“However, Ferdinand went to Ahrensbach without defying the royal decree,” I continued. “Thus, I must also obey. The most I could do was use my adoption to support Ehrenfest, but I do believe I was of some use.”

Bonifatius went to say something, but Sylvester spoke first. “Your granddaughter is marrying a prince. Shouldn’t you be glad? You never stopped complaining that Wilfried was no match for her and that she was wasted on him.”

This time, Bonifatius grimaced. He turned to look at Wilfried, who returned a sardonic smile and said, “I don’t see why this surprises you, Lord Bonifatius. You’ve said it yourself more times than I can count: Rozemyne excels no matter where she goes. She’s more suitable to be the next aub. She can do anything...”

Wilfried then stared at Sylvester. He was clearly battling a storm of emotions—his fists were clenched and trembling atop the table—but unlike Bonifatius, he didn’t raise his voice or lose his

temper. Instead, he continued in a calm but dry manner.

"I was the only archduke candidate who could tie Rozemyne to Ehrenfest, was I not? Every time I asked to end our engagement, you told me it was my duty to endure it. And now it's been canceled."

It seemed that he had also considered our engagement to be a loveless duty. Maybe he had wanted to cancel it from the start, but everyone else had gotten in the way.

Is this a boon for Wilfried, then?

Because our engagement was being canceled as the result of a royal decree, it wouldn't damage his reputation. I sighed, relieved. There was no reason to dwell on it any further, right?

"So, Father... who will be Ehrenfest's next aub?" Wilfried asked.

Sylvester met his gaze and quietly said, "That's a decision for later. There's no point in us discussing it now."

The tension in the room was so thick that one could cut it with a knife. How blind had I been to think that Wilfried would appreciate this royal decree? He was still desperately trying to contain his emotions, and seeing that made my stomach drop.

Sylvester continued, "The role could go to Charlotte if she takes a groom from another duchy. Or to Melchior. It could go to the child whom Florencia is carrying right now. Or, if you work hard enough, it could still go to you, Wilfried."

"Um, Father..." Charlotte interjected, her indigo eyes wide with disbelief as they flitted from him to Wilfried. "Is that to say...?"

Florencia smiled, then finally broke her silence. "Charlotte, you have had to endure the unreasonable for so long. To save Wilfried and secure Rozemyne's position, the right to pursue the seat of aub that rightfully belongs to every archduke candidate was taken from you. Yet you never made your dissatisfaction known and worked tirelessly to support them both. The amount of work you have put into keeping Ehrenfest together cannot be understated."

Charlotte's eyes grew wet with tears, and she rejoiced that her efforts were finally being understood and praised. Meanwhile, I realized that I hadn't shown her even a fraction of the gratitude she deserved. She had always been so considerate, consoling and supporting me when I needed it, but what had I done for her? Not nearly enough.

I'm a terrible big sister...

Wilfried was a year older than Charlotte, and men were

prioritized for the archducal seat. Maybe because of that, as well as my own disinterest in ruling Ehrenfest, it had never even occurred to me that she might want to become the next aub.

Sylvester arranged the engagement, but did I betray Charlotte by accepting it...?

If she had grown up working hard to become the next archduchess, then I must have obstructed and even wounded her by rescuing Wilfried through our engagement and securing his place as the next aub.

I examined my sister carefully. She was too busy staring at Florencia to look back at me.

“Charlotte,” Florencia said, “as the royal decree has undone Wilfried and Rozemyne’s engagement, I will give you a choice. If you wish to become the next aub, then find what you lack during the next five years, while the marriage restrictions are in place, and wed a man worthy of serving as the first husband of the next Aub Ehrenfest. Rozemyne’s move to the Sovereignty means that the environment here will change drastically. Keep a keen eye on those changes and make whatever choices seem best.”

Charlotte had three options: she could aspire to become the next aub, she could marry an archnoble and adopt a more supportive role in Ehrenfest, or she could wait five years and then marry into another duchy. She smiled and nodded at Florencia, then turned to Sylvester and asked, “Father, when will the next aub be chosen?”

He shut his eyes. “As I said, not right away. We can’t even be sure that Rozemyne’s current adoption will be nullified a year from now. It’s extremely likely to happen, but still—until it actually does, we’re going to maintain the status quo. Don’t tell your retainers, and act as though everything is normal. Take care not to let anything slip.”

Charlotte nodded again. There must have been countless thoughts running through her head; although she was looking at Sylvester, she was lost in her own little world.

“To be honest,” Sylvester said, “I think the decision can wait until either Bonifatius or I pass away. We had to hurry with the engagement and make it clear who was going to take the archducal seat to contain the Leisegangs and forestall their attempts to make Rozemyne the next aub, but we won’t need to rush this time around. Bonifatius has been educated to serve as an interim

archduke, so even if I die first, the decision can wait.”

“Understood,” Charlotte replied, her eyes sparkling.

Florencia looked at her daughter as if admiring a dazzling light, then turned to her youngest son. “The same goes for you, Melchior. If you wish to be the aub in the future, then you will need to work hard so that you are worthy of the position.”

He paused in thought, then shook his head. “I will... consider that when I’ve come of age. Right now, I need to focus on being the High Bishop. There’s so much for me to learn that I’m never not busy. And we only have a year before Rozemyne leaves. I can’t think about becoming the aub right now.”

Florencia looked surprised, then smiled. “That certainly is true. Going forward, those who wish to become aubs will need to pray often and obtain more divine protections. Carry out your duties and spend the time until your coming of age thinking about your future.”

“Yes, Mother. And, Rozemyne...” He looked at me, brimming with resolve to become the next High Bishop. “I look forward to your teachings over the next year.”

I felt a goofy smile appear on my face. He was relying on me!

“You will do just fine,” I said. “I cannot bring all of my retainers to the Sovereignty, so I intend to leave several of them in the temple. They will come to your aid should you need them. You can also expect help from the blue priests we have trained thus far, such as Kampfner and Frietack. Only through the support of others have I managed to perform my duties as the High Bishop.”

“I might be able to leave the paperwork to them, but my hardest job is going to be learning to give blessings like you do, Rozemyne.” Melchior puffed out his cheeks. “I know it’s the most important duty of a High Bishop, but still.”

Sylvester smirked ever so slightly and waved dismissively. “Rozemyne has so much mana that even the royal family asked for her to perform their ceremonies. She’s a good goal to work toward, but take care not to drive yourself crazy—it’s going to take you a long time to match what she does. You’ll get better and better as you learn to compress your mana at the Royal Academy and start getting more to work with. For now, though, Rozemyne needs to hand over everything she’s been doing—from her duties in the temple to her work with the printing industry—all while preparing for her new life. It won’t be easy for her, so help out as much as you

can.”

“Right!”

Melchior and Charlotte were both radiating hope, but Wilfried seemed graver than ever. He had a noble smile plastered over his face, but he was sitting stock-still and in complete silence.

“Charlotte, Melchior, Bonifatius—remember not to say a word about Rozemyne’s adoption to anyone,” Sylvester cautioned. “If you leak anything to your retainers, there’s no knowing what the Leisegangs might do. And if any of the other duchies find out, the Royal Academy will become a drastically more dangerous place for Rozemyne to be.”

“Understood.”

“Alright. You may leave.” He looked at Wilfried. “There’s... more that the rest of us need to discuss.”

The three glanced at Wilfried, their expressions betraying their concern, then quietly took their leave. Sylvester, Florencia, Wilfried, and I were the only ones left in the meeting room.

“You did well to keep your emotions under control, Wilfried,” Sylvester said.

The frustration that had been eating away at Wilfried finally surfaced. “I’m the only archduke candidate raised by Grandmother. I’m also a criminal who entered the Ivory Tower, and someone who by all rights should have been punished alongside the rest of the former Veronica faction during the winter purge. You told me I was by far the least suitable archduke candidate to become aub—that I probably wouldn’t be able to remain an archduke candidate, let alone take the archducal seat, if my engagement to Rozemyne were canceled. Well, here we are. What’s going to happen to me?”

“I... don’t know. I said as much before.”

“Father!” Wilfried shouted, slamming a fist against the table. His sudden outburst surprised me so much that I immediately recoiled.

“Um, what do you mean you don’t know what will happen to Wilfried once our engagement is canceled...?” I asked. “And what conversation are you both referring to?” Everyone was on the same page but me, and it made me feel as though I didn’t belong here.

“The purge cost Wilfried his support base,” Sylvester explained. “And if your engagement falls through while the Leisegangs are Ehrenfest’s dominant power, it wouldn’t be strange for everyone to unite and push for him to be sent to the Ivory Tower so that he can

never become the next aub. Everything will depend on how much we can curb the Leisegangs' power over the next year—and as it stands, we don't know what the situation is going to look like when the cancellation is finally announced."

Apparently, many of the Leisegangs were adamant that letting the one archduke candidate whom Veronica had raised—and a criminal who had entered the Ivory Tower, at that—become the next aub would make a mockery of the duchy's leadership. They were openly and persistently demanding that he be removed from his current position and executed.

"Um, but that doesn't make any sense," I said. "Ehrenfest has already lost Ferdinand; once it loses me as well, it won't have enough mana to support itself. Yet they're calling for an honor student archduke candidate to be removed...? How dumb are they? As far as I see it, the problem is that the Leisegangs refuse to accept the reality of our situation."

"That's pretty blunt of you, but... you're right," Sylvester replied with a sigh.

Wilfried glared at me, his eyes sharper than ever. "Why are you acting as though this has nothing to do with you?" he snapped. "It's *your* job to contain the Leisegangs. You're their 'princess,' aren't you? Instead, you've completely abandoned your duty."

"Excuse me?" I asked, blinking at him.

Sylvester quickly intervened. "Stop, Wilfried. Rozemyne was raised in the temple, so she doesn't think of the Leisegangs as her family. Karstedt, Elvira, and Bonifatius are the ones tasked with controlling them. Brunhilde will eventually take on the duty as well."

"But Father!" Wilfried exclaimed. "Over the course of Spring Prayer, the Leisegangs told me I was your favorite to become the next aub purely because of my sex. They said that Rozemyne would doubtless rule Ehrenfest if not for my unfair advantage—that my becoming an archduke was a laughable farce, yet I possessed not even the good sense to step down. She is their figurehead. She shares their blood, so she must have something—*anything*—that can control them!"

The Leisegangs' insults hadn't ended there, though; they had continuously mentioned my three consecutive years of coming first-in-class as evidence that Wilfried was inferior to me, and relentlessly asserted that my bloodline and past were spotless

compared to his.

He continued, "Father, why did you force me down the path to become the next aub when nobody else wanted it? If everyone hates me with a passion, then what good was it trying to earn their support? Am I to spend the rest of my life being mocked and abused, with people even refusing to address me properly? Am I always going to be compared to Rozemyne, a prodigy the likes of which the world has never seen before, and told that I could only ever become the aub by her good graces? Must even my cherished memories of my childhood be blackened with bitterness, shame, and regret?"

Veronica had done many horrible things to Ferdinand and to the duchy as a whole, but to Wilfried, she had always been his kind grandmother who had raised him from a young age. Even now that she was in the Ivory Tower, he was nostalgic for the time they had spent together. It was probably similar to how I still cared about Ferdinand even now that he had moved to Ahrensbach. No matter how much people told me not to worry or think about him, I couldn't stop myself.

"Rozemyne, I don't want to live as your husband when you clearly care about Uncle more and prefer to spend your time helping him over me. I'd rather die than spend a lifetime with everyone comparing me to you, and you comparing me to him. Every time I'm told to make an engagement feystone for you, or to send you some gifts, I just think about how you'll compare whatever I give you to what you already have from Uncle. I can't stomach it."

I gazed down at all of my charms from Ferdinand. Apparently, they had hurt Wilfried's pride as a man.

But, well... they're protective charms. I can't just take them off.

Wilfried continued, "Once I'd come to terms with the fact that I didn't want to marry a girl who only cared about someone else, I concluded that it was best for you to become the aub, since you already had the support of the Leisegangs. So I went to Father and requested as much."

I turned to Sylvester. "I wasn't told about this..."

"For obvious reasons," he replied. "Had you found out that Wilfried wanted to cancel your engagement, you would have tried to cancel it as well, right? But you wouldn't have wanted to become the next aub, which would have made it easy for the royal family or

a top-ranking duchy to poach you. It would have brought chaos to Ehrenfest and absolutely zero benefit, so why would we have told you? In fact, your retainers were all doing their best to keep you and Wilfried apart so that you wouldn't work together to end your engagement."

Everything clicked. In retrospect, our retainers *had* actively worked to keep us away from one another.

And that was when I started sending those ordonnances of concern. Wilfried must have been truly miserable having to listen to those forced messages day in, day out, when he was only keeping up the engagement because he felt duty bound to.

Now I was starting to wonder why Sylvester had told me to show more concern for Wilfried in the first place. Considering everything that had been going on behind the scenes, it had been guaranteed to backfire.

"The only thing Father had to do was order you to become the next aub," Wilfried ranted, "but he refused no matter what I said to him. He just kept repeating that he couldn't allow you to rule Ehrenfest—that I needed to take the archducal seat—over and over again. He also said that he couldn't nullify our engagement because it was the only thing keeping you in Ehrenfest. In his words, it was the future I'd chosen, so I needed to take responsibility for it."

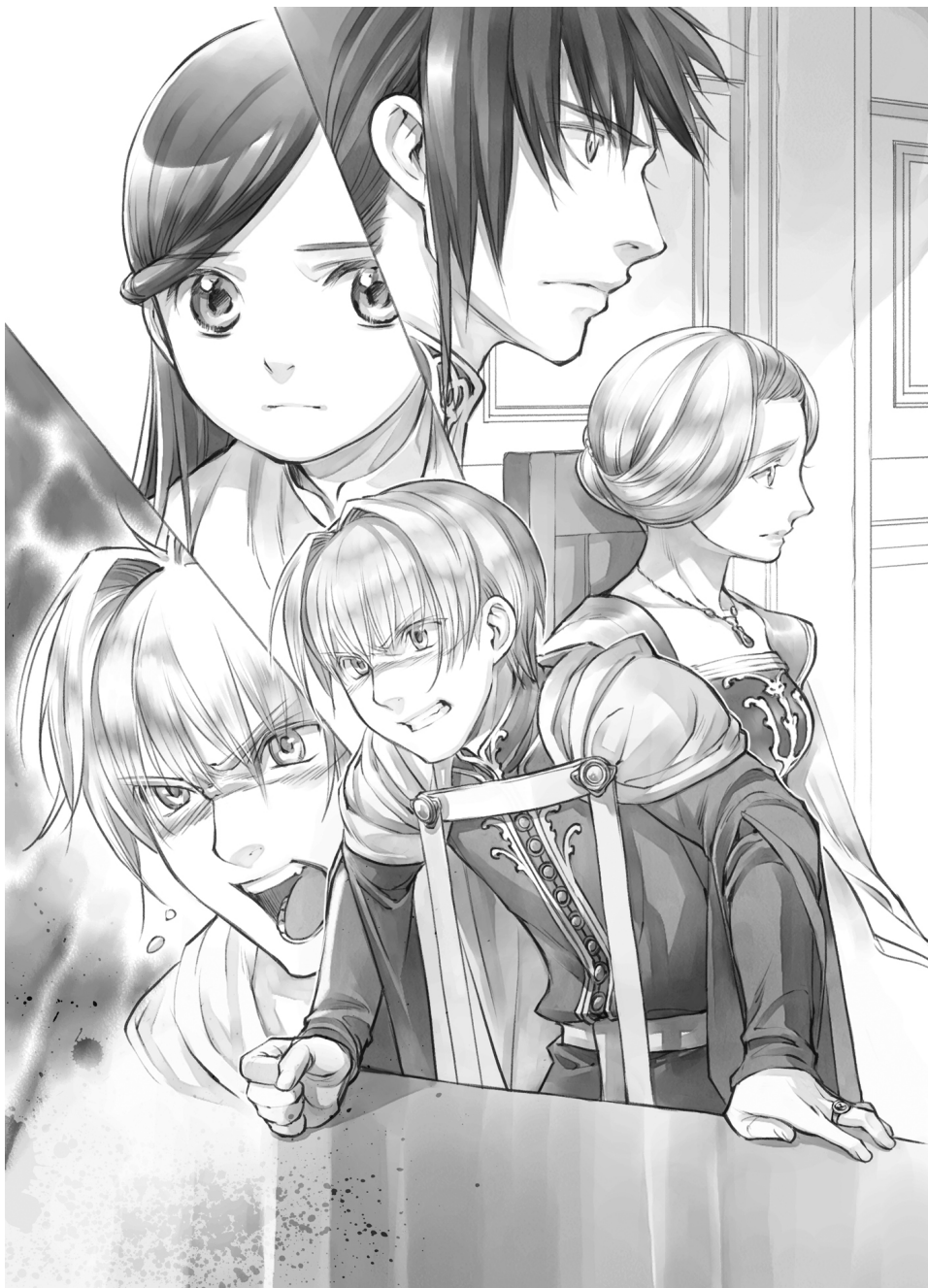
Sylvester, Ferdinand, and Karstedt had no intention of letting me, a former commoner, become the duchy's next aub. Wilfried didn't know this, though, and Sylvester wasn't able to tell him, so communication between them had quickly broken down.

Sylvester shook his head, looking exhausted. "Wilfried, if you had refused to marry Rozemyne when I first proposed it or told me your true feelings before Ferdinand was required to leave Ehrenfest, I wouldn't have hesitated to cancel the engagement. But you changed your tune at the worst possible moment."

If we had ended our engagement back when Wilfried complained to Sylvester, then the royal family or a top-ranking duchy would almost certainly have claimed me. And with the Leisegangs strengthened by the purge, Wilfried would have been in great danger. Sylvester had no intention of sending his own son to the Ivory Tower, especially when that son had worked so hard to avoid disinheritance and even managed to become an honor student at the Royal Academy. I didn't want Wilfried to be punished or treated that harshly either.

“Father!” Wilfried cried, his voice betraying such deep anguish that my heart began to ache. “You told me that, as Aub Ehrenfest, you were unable to let Rozemyne go. You said that it was my duty to accept the engagement. You made me swallow my true feelings and suffer the consequences, so why is Rozemyne being adopted by the king all of a sudden? And why do we need to spend the next year pretending that our engagement hasn’t already fallen apart? I don’t know how I can be expected to put on a brave face when Rozemyne is becoming a royal and abandoning Ehrenfest, while I’m destined to lose the security of my current position and clash with the Leisegangs.”

He fell silent for a moment, then gritted his teeth and slammed a fist against the table again. “Don’t play dumb with me! If you hadn’t agreed to it, Rozemyne wouldn’t be a year away from entering the royal family! If you had made her the next aub, you could have turned them down!” But with the Grutrissheit at stake, I doubted that making me Ehrenfest’s next ruler would have changed anything.



Wilfried continued, “If she had become the next aub and our engagement had been canceled, I would have been free. The Leisegangs would have had their wish granted, and they wouldn’t have cared whether I lived or died. But if she’s leaving to join the royal family... Ehrenfest will descend into chaos. What am I supposed to do?!”

It was terrifying to see your entire future go dark—to not know where you stood or whether you would even survive. I understood that all too well.

Sylvester looked at his son head-on. “You can live as you please, Wilfried.”

“What...?”

“If you aren’t set to become the next aub anymore, then it won’t be your job to keep the Leisegangs under control. Brunhilde and I will take them on instead, as will whoever else strives to rule Ehrenfest. As long as you don’t forget your duties as an archducal family member, you won’t need to balance anything else. You can leave your current burdens to others.”

Wilfried said nothing. He was like a deer caught in the headlights.

“In a year’s time, you *will* be free,” Sylvester went on. “You could support Ehrenfest as an archduke candidate, as Bonifatius does, or you could wait five years and marry into another duchy. You could become a giebe—our duchy is in dire need of them—or you could introduce a new industry as Rozemyne did. You could even take your pick of classes from the knight course and strive to become the knight commander, as Bonifatius and Ferdinand did. Of course, you could also continue to work toward becoming the next aub, this time in a race that wouldn’t see you constantly compared to Rozemyne.”

Just as Florencia had suggested paths for Charlotte, Sylvester was trying to give Wilfried as many options as he could think of.

“Wilfried... what do you want to become?” I asked.

“What do... *I* want...?”

“The status quo won’t change for another year. Perhaps you could spend this time deciding what kind of a life you want to live. Preparing for the future will require some work, no matter which path you take; why not use this time productively?”

Wilfried eyed me skeptically. “I already know one thing: I can’t bear being engaged to you.”

“The feeling’s mutual. Just as you can’t see me as your wife, I can’t see you as my husband. I’m still not sure how one is even supposed to interact with one’s partner-to-be. People were always telling me to do a better job, but to be honest, trying to keep up the act was painful.”

It hadn’t been pleasant knowing that everyone expected such grand tales of romance from what had been little more than a political engagement, nor had it been nice being constantly told to act more like a fiancée when I didn’t know how to.

“But for this next year”—I held out my hand—“I think we can act as siblings again.” We might not have made a good couple, but we had gotten along well as brother and sister.

Wilfried stared at my hand, deep in thought, then smiled softly and took it. “Yeah. Being engaged to you was painful, but I still love you as a sister. I’ll use this time to think about my future.”

My Retainers' Choices

After his brief explosion, during which he'd said *a lot* that I'd wanted to protest, Wilfried agreed to maintain the status quo for the next year. That was a huge relief—and it meant he didn't have anything to do with me anymore. No matter what path he chose moving forward, Sylvester and Florencia would doubtless protect him.

"If you will excuse me, I must return to my chambers," I said. "My retainers will need to consider their next moves."

"Go ahead," Sylvester replied. "You'll need permission from the parents of any retainers who aren't name-sworn to you. As for the others, work under the assumption that they won't be going with you, even if only to prevent crucial intelligence from leaking over the next year. If they *really* want to serve you, they can enter the Sovereignty after coming of age."

I nodded, took a step toward the door, then stopped; there was something else I needed to ask.

"Um, by the way... Would it be acceptable for me to write to Ferdinand, or is that restriction still in place?" Surely I was fine to resume our correspondence now that I no longer needed to act like the perfect fiancée.

Sylvester looked exasperated; after everything that had just happened, I was still thinking about Ferdinand. He gave me permission, though—on the condition that I show him the letter first.

"You sure do love Uncle, huh?" Wilfried sighed, then accompanied me to the door.

"My feelings for him are the same as yours for your grandmother," I said. "She is someone you value and worry about, is she not? My mentor, a man who has looked after me since before my baptism, was sent by royal decree to a place out of my reach. To make matters worse, the next time I saw him, he had consumed more rejuvenation potions than any one man should—a testament to the grueling environment in which he is being made to work."

How could I not worry about him? You must remember the cloying smell of rejuvenation potions when he stayed in the tea party room.”

Wilfried started to frown. “He *always* smells like potions. How can you tell whether that’s from brewing or using them?”

“That you even need to ask speaks volumes. Have you not been brewing enough? If you cannot even distinguish between those two smells, then how will you be able to brew what you need when you need it?” Wilfried would surely be in trouble if he couldn’t brew his own charms or rejuvenation potions.

The crease in his brow deepened. “I say this as your brother, but... your ‘common sense’ makes no sense at all. No normal member of an archducal family brews things themselves.”

“Are you sure? Ferdinand always brewed his own potions and charms.”

“That’s because he *enjoys* brewing. He’s the same when it comes to research. That doesn’t make it any less strange to the rest of us.”

I could already feel my understanding of noble society starting to crumble once again. “But I was told that I need to *at least* be able to make my own potions. Is that not the norm?”

“It doesn’t hurt to be able to make them—it might even be a good skill to have in case of an emergency—but that job would normally fall to your scholars.”

I already knew where my misunderstanding had come from: before his move to Ahrensbach, Ferdinand had often holed up in his temple workshop to brew one thing or another. To make matters worse, Justus had never gone inside with him, nor had the attendant-slash-scholar ever carried around a daily supply of potions—not to my knowledge, at least. Could anyone blame me for assuming that nobles were supposed to make their own regularly used potions?

Ferdinand was holding me to a weird standard after all...

My time on Earth and in the lower city had done enough to make my common sense seem unusual in the eyes of the country’s nobles. That was why I’d started taking after Ferdinand—but now I was being told that he was unusual too!

To be honest, I’ve suspected as much for a very long time. I’m not sure anyone has ever said it to me outright, though...

“Why do you think we take scholars as retainers in the first place?” Wilfried asked.

“Well, mine tend to be busy doing administrative work in the temple, transcribing books, collecting stories at the Royal Academy, and writing stories of their own. In any case, it makes more sense for me to brew my own charms and potions; Ferdinand’s recipes need to be kept secret, and they all require a lot of mana.”

I couldn’t ask Philine or Roderick to make my rejuvenation potions for me—they had neither the mana nor the skill necessary to brew them. Hartmut was a more realistic option, but I wanted him to focus on temple work.

“You should give your scholars more brewing work to do,” Wilfried sagely noted. “At this rate, people are sure to criticize whatever grades they end up with in brewing class as too low for archducal retainers.”

“I assumed that was simply inevitable for laynobles and mednobles, but I see now that I should reconsider.”

I never hesitated to give Philine or Roderick paperwork to complete—there was no denying their talent for it—but because of their mana, I’d never even thought to entrust them with brewing. Instead, as a scholar myself, I’d opted to take care of my own brews. But maybe a change of perspective was necessary.

“Lady Rozemyne,” Cornelius called. He had just rushed over, no doubt concerned that I was leaving so much later than Charlotte and the others. Seeing the worry on his face made me a little embarrassed, but that worry turned to caution the moment he set eyes on Wilfried.

“We must return to my chambers,” I said. “Could you summon all of my retainers? There is something important I need to tell everyone. Summon both Brunhilde and Ottilie as well.”

“Understood.”

I returned to my chambers to find that my retainers had all gathered. “I am only making this announcement because every single one of you will need to consider your future afterward,” I said. “It is confidential to the highest degree. Do not share what I am about to tell you with *anyone*.”

They responded in unison: “Yes, my lady.”

I went on to tell everyone that, during next year’s Archduke Conference, my current adoption would most likely be undone so that the king could take me as *his* adopted daughter instead. “This could change according to the royal family’s whims,” I said, “but

understand that I am extremely likely to be moved to the Sovereignty.”

As expected, everyone stared at me in shock. Well, almost everyone; Hartmut alone remained impassive, as though he had predicted this development already.

“What of Lord Wilfried?” he asked.

“Our engagement will be canceled at the same time as the adoption. Until then, we intend to maintain the status quo.”

“And he agreed to this...?” Hartmut murmured. Now he looked surprised; he must not have anticipated that Wilfried would play along.

Next, I turned to Brunhilde. Because she had already chosen to become the aub’s second wife, she wouldn’t be able to accompany me under any circumstances. “Brunhilde, I regret that this occurred after you resolved to marry Aub Ehrenfest in order to support me. However, once I am gone, I would ask you to protect the lower-city craftsmen and all of my trends, while at the same time introducing your own trends to further Ehrenfest’s growth.”

Brunhilde had once believed that these matters could simply be dumped on the commoners, but she had since realized that not all orders were able to be followed. Now she attended meetings with the commoner merchants and did everything in her power to ensure that all parties were on the same page. It would be reassuring to know that she planned to stay in Ehrenfest as a member of the archducal family.

“Becoming the aub’s second wife was my decision, and not a single part of me regrets it,” Brunhilde said plainly. “I shall devote my all to Ehrenfest. But, if you would allow me to ask... what will this mean for Bertilde?”

“She will spend the coming winter serving formally as my apprentice attendant. Doing so will allow her to receive the same treatment as the other retainers I am leaving behind, and also prepare her to serve you next spring. Please guide her as her elder sister. Although, if she chooses not to serve as a retainer, we will not be able to share this intelligence with her. Explaining the circumstances would prove... troublesome.”

“Understood.”

Bertilde often came and went for her education, but she wasn’t formally my retainer. That was why she hadn’t been summoned along with the others, and why we had to keep her out of the loop.

Brunhilde would need to take care of the rest.

That concluded my discussion with Brunhilde, who would definitely be staying behind. I turned to my other retainers, who were looking very concerned.

“Given the times, I cannot leave my underage retainers who are name-sworn to me here in Ehrenfest. I already have the royal family’s permission to bring them with me to the Sovereignty. My other underage retainers, on the other hand, would need parental permission at every turn. Thus, I must ask you to stay behind—at least until you come of age, at which point you may move to the Sovereignty if you wish.”

I continued, looking at each of my name-sworn in turn, “Roderick, Matthias, Laurenz, Gretia—the four of you will come with me to the Sovereignty. Muriella is an exception, as she made it clear from the beginning that she wished to give her name to Elvira. From the moment I accepted your names, my intention has been to look after you for the rest of your lives. You entrusted yourselves to me, and I will not cast you aside.”

Matthias’s expression softened. “We are honored. I offered my name to you because I wished to follow you for the rest of my days. I am glad it was not merely returned to me.”

“Being able to escape my parents is enough to get me on board with this move to the Sovereignty...” Roderick said, evidently relieved. Gretia nodded along with him; they both had complicated relationships with their families.

Laurenz, however, frowned. “I can’t help but worry about my little brother in the orphanage... but as I’ve given you my name, I will obey your orders.”

“Indeed, there is no way for us to bring Bertram with us,” I said. “Leaving before his baptism will prevent him from being adopted—and even if we waited until after, he would still be too young to attend the Royal Academy and become my retainer.” The Sovereignty was far more dangerous than Ehrenfest, so I couldn’t bring a newly baptized child there without a guardian. “Rest assured, though—Melchior will serve as the High Bishop after my departure. I intend to leave my temple attendants here, so your brother’s treatment in the orphanage will not suddenly worsen.”

“I thank you for your consideration,” Laurenz replied, kneeling before me with his arms crossed.

Roderick raised a hand, having sensed that his fellow retainer’s

concern was now dealt with. “How will moving to the Sovereignty affect our lives in the Royal Academy?” Philine must have been interested as well; I saw her subtly lean closer to me.

“You are aware that the children of Sovereign nobles attend the Academy as students of their home duchies, correct?” I asked. “My underage retainers who accompany me to the Sovereignty will stay in the Ehrenfest Dormitory during academic terms. I will appreciate your best efforts to gather information for me during that time.”

Roderick and Gretia nodded. Philine was watching them, a contemplative hand resting on her cheek.

All of a sudden, Hartmut approached me. “Lady Rozemyne,” he said, “I beseech you. Please accept my name.”

“Hartmut, I thought you promised not to offer me your name unless I explicitly requested it.”

“My mind and the circumstances have changed. Your move to the Sovereignty is sure to be a crucial event. If you would call upon your name-sworn first and foremost, then I wish to join them.”

That was it? He was offering me his name purely because he hadn’t been in the very first group of people I’d asked to come with me? “U-Um, Hartmut...” I said, desperate to stop him. “I only listed them first because they have no choice in this matter, whereas you do. It had nothing to do with importance. Perhaps we could say that I saw no reason to include you because I already trust you unconditionally. Or, uh... something to do with unwavering faith...”

I stumbled over my words a little. In truth, I’d automatically assumed that he would follow me, but that seemed too presumptuous to say out loud.

Hartmut gave a breezy smile. “That you trust me unconditionally means nothing in this situation. Ehrenfest will struggle in your absence, and you have already made it clear that you do not wish to bring many retainers with you. One could assume that, *because you trust me*, you would want me to stay behind to protect your library, the temple, and the merchants.”

“I can’t deny that I would take comfort in knowing that you were here,” I mused. “However...”

I’d wanted to say that I couldn’t even imagine him willingly staying behind, but before I could even get the words out, Hartmut knelt before me and took my hand. “I wish to serve you at any time, under any circumstances, without anyone finding it the least bit unusual,” he announced. “To that end, I *implore you* to take my

name. I swear that it will benefit you.”

“Hartmut! Your fiancée is right there!” I cried, pulling my hand away before pointing frantically at the woman in question. “Say that sort of thing to *her*, not me!”

Clarissa rushed over at once, but not to take my side. She dropped to her knees beside Hartmut, batted her sparkling blue eyes at me, and exclaimed, “Mine too! If you take Hartmut’s name, I want you to take mine as well, Lady Rozemyne!”

Um, what’s with that reaction?!

“Clarissa,” I said, “you shouldn’t be so quick to give away your name. You’re soon to be married, aren’t you? Should you and Hartmut not give your names to each other as proof of your everlasting love?”

It clearly wasn’t normal to give your name to someone else right in front of your future spouse, but neither Hartmut nor Clarissa seemed to understand that. They looked at one another, still on their knees, and cocked their heads.

“You want me to give my name to Hartmut...?” Clarissa asked. “That would be unthinkable.”

“I agree from the very bottom of my heart,” Hartmut concurred. “It would make no sense for me to give my name to Clarissa. In my opinion, we could create a much stronger bond if we both gave our names to you.”

“My, what a wonderful idea! It truly would create the strongest and most passionate of all bonds!”

How?! And what’s so wonderful about it?! This has been obvious for a while, but something is seriously wrong with these two.

Or maybe my warped common sense was the problem, as it had been earlier with Wilfried. Hartmut and Clarissa were in such vehement agreement that I was starting to doubt myself.

“Ottilie, um... does their argument seem reasonable? From a noble perspective, I mean. Can someone form a stronger bond with his spouse by offering his name to another while in her presence, then convincing her to join him?” I was desperately hoping she could stop her son and his fiancée.

She gave me a brief smile, then shook her head. “Fear not, Lady Rozemyne—your hunch was correct. This is not normal in the slightest. However... it would appear that Clarissa is experiencing something of an emotional turmoil. She served you only for a short while during the Archduke Conference, and now she fears being left

behind. My sincerest apologies, but I must ask you to take them *both* to the Sovereignty with you, whether you decide to accept their names or not.”

Ottilie was looking at the overzealous couple kneeling in front of me as though she had nothing to do with them. I’d already assumed that they would follow me to the Sovereignty no matter what I did, and seeing them now made me sure that it hadn’t just been my imagination.

“I cannot go with you to the Sovereignty because of my husband,” Ottilie continued, “but those two would follow you wherever you go. Taking their names might be wise in case they allow their enthusiasm to get the better of them. Trying to control them both would otherwise be an insurmountable task.”

Was that really the response most nobles would give? I was seriously beginning to worry that I didn’t have a single normal person close to me.

“Ottilie, should you really be saying that as Hartmut’s mother?” I asked. “Giving me his name would also mean putting his life in my hands, no?”

“I am absolutely certain that their behavior would not change whether they were sworn to you or not. Thus, your convenience takes priority. They are both adults, so they are more than old enough to face the consequences of their actions. Should you need anyone to observe their name-swearing, I am at your service.”

Wait, she’s dumping them on me! Has she given up and decided to stop thinking about them entirely?!

I’d assumed that Ottilie would be able to keep Hartmut and Clarissa on a tight leash, but I saw now that I was gravely mistaken. I reluctantly cast my eyes down to see Hartmut staring up at me, his orange eyes sparkling with joy.

I... I want to refuse him again, but that’s really hard to do when he’s looking at me like this.

“Mother has given her permission, so please do accept my name,” Hartmut said. “I already have the necessary materials, so I can have everything ready by tomorrow.”

Aah! He’s shoving his name down my throat! Is refusing him not even an option anymore?!

I turned to my other retainers, searching for someone who could come to my rescue—but every single one of them was averting their gaze. They were going to great lengths not to look at

Hartmut or Clarissa either.

“Cornelius, Damuel,” I said, urging them to help me.

They exchanged troubled glances, then Cornelius sighed. “As you are not in danger, I cannot speak on a private matter such as a name-swearing. If you cannot bear to take Hartmut’s name, then you need only flatly refuse him. If you are unsure, I would suggest accepting it. That will minimize the collateral damage.”

Rather than coming to my rescue, Damuel also advised me to accept Hartmut’s name. “Just as Cornelius suggests, it would come as a tremendous relief to all of your retainers if you were to accept.”

“Has there been collateral damage in the past?” I asked, cautious.

Damuel remained silent, so Cornelius answered in his stead: “It’s nothing. Hartmut can be harsh when venting his envy toward your name-sworn retainers, that’s all.”

When doing what?!

“Cornelius, you need not sully Lady Rozemyne’s ears with such details,” Hartmut said, smiling.

Cornelius smiled in response. “I only speak the truth. And you would do well to remember that I am *encouraging* Lady Rozemyne to accept your name.” Their back-and-forth made them seem very close indeed—and as nobody had even tried to refute Cornelius, he must have been telling the truth.

“Very well, Hartmut. I shall accept your name,” I eventually relented. “That’s enough, right? That’s what you want? Give it to me so this madness can end.”

“So, when shall we do this?” Hartmut asked. “The sooner, the better, of course.”

As expected, Clarissa wasn’t going to back down either. “Lady Rozemyne!” she cried. “Mine too, please! Mine too!”

“What a relief...” Matthias sighed.

“He should start to calm down now, right?” Laurenz asked.

For some reason, Hartmut wasn’t the only one who rejoiced when I conceded; everyone else was glad as well.

Is it really okay to perform a name-swearing this lightly? I don’t think so. But I’m not the one in the wrong here... right?

Just as I was beginning to lose confidence, Philine approached me and said, “Lady Rozemyne, please take my name as well. I swore to offer stories to you and managed to receive Mestionora’s

divine protection. It was then that I resolved to serve you and you alone. Furthermore, staying in Ehrenfest would only see me sent back home. If the only way for me to accompany you is to give my name, then I shall do so without hesitation. Please, take me with you to the Sovereignty!”

Philine’s grass-green eyes were brimming with resolve. I’d seen this expression from her several times before. I already knew that she was determined to forge her own path, but... I couldn’t accept her name right away.

“What about Konrad...?” I asked. “Laurenz has already given his name, but you still have a choice.”

Her expression stiffened; then she pursed her lips and said, “I intend to purchase him. He has yet to be baptized, so I could sell my mother’s heirloom and use the money from that.”

“I understand your desire not to leave him behind, but what do you intend to do once he has moved to the Sovereignty?” My underage retainers were each allowed to bring an apprentice attendant with them, but Konrad was a boy—he wouldn’t be allowed to stay in Philine’s room. He was also too young to work in the Sovereignty as a servant. In the orphanage, he was fed and given hand-me-down clothes, but what about after the move? Philine would need to cover those costs herself when she was already struggling to prepare the feystones and learning materials she required for the Royal Academy.

“I...” Philine looked at me with pleading eyes, but Ferdinand had already scolded me several times for getting too involved with my retainers. I couldn’t show any more favoritism, nor could I offer to look after her brother myself. Above all else, though, I couldn’t imagine Konrad having much of a future living in the Sovereignty as a commoner orphan.

“There is no need for you to rush into a decision,” I said. “You have time to think this over and consult Konrad. Perhaps you should use the next year to carefully consider your next move.”

“Understood...” Philine replied, her shoulders slumping as she took a step back.

“Lady Rozemyne, I must also request some time to think,” Cornelius interjected. “Assuming that I do join you, my situation will change dramatically depending on whether I go before or after getting married, and there is much I must think about before I can decide whether a wedding this summer is for the best.”

Cornelius had already been given Eckhart's estate, and the preparations for his marriage were well underway. Leonore smiled and said that she would go along with whatever he decided; it was nice to see the flames of their romance burning as brightly as ever.

Oh, right... I'll need to report to Mother and Father.

Karstedt had been there when I first announced my Zent candidacy, and we were keeping him abreast of the situation as it developed, since his permission was necessary to cancel my adoption. But there was a chance that Elvira still didn't know.

Hopefully I'm allowed to explain things to her. She's going to be taking over the printing industry, after all.

I would need to consult Sylvester as well, but that was a thought for later. I turned my attention to Damuel, who had at some point stepped away from Leonore and Cornelius, and asked, "Damuel, what will you do?"

Damuel already knew so much about my circumstances, so I really wanted to have him in the Sovereignty with me, but laynobles struggled even in Ehrenfest; I couldn't just force him to come along. He had cultivated strong bonds of trust with the lower city's soldiers, so maybe I could ask him to stay behind and protect the city.

"This is not something I can decide here and now," he replied. "I would ask for some time to think."

"Very well. Judithe?"

She gave me a somewhat dejected smile. "I think I will end up staying in Ehrenfest. My father presented me with a marriage proposal the last time I returned to Kirnberger, and it seems unlikely that he would allow me to move to the Sovereignty after coming of age. Plus... I don't have the courage to give my name just to go with you."

Those who were still underage required their parents' permission to do just about anything. Even their marriages were out of their control. Judithe's situation at home was perfectly normal—even watching her interact with Theodore showed what a close-knit family they were. She couldn't abandon them on the spur of the moment, and she would be able to carry on just fine without entrusting her name to someone else, unlike Matthias and the others who hadn't had a choice.

"You seem to feel guilty about not accompanying me," I said, "but there's really no need. Most underage nobles would stay

behind in a situation like this. Rarely would their parents even allow them to move. And your reluctance to give your name is completely normal—Hartmut and Clarissa are the weird ones, not us!”

Judithe looked at the unusual couple, then nodded in agreement.

I continued, “Brunhilde and Ottilie are staying behind as well. I don’t consider it a betrayal in the least. In fact... Judithe, I would ask that you remain in Ehrenfest and offer Brunhilde your assistance.”

“Yes, my lady!” she exclaimed. Just seeing her bright, beaming smile made me sigh in relief.

Lieseleta placed a hand on Judithe’s shoulder, her own lips curling upward. “May we work hard together. I am both the successor to my house and already engaged to Lord Thorsten, so it would not be an easy task for me to leave Ehrenfest. After Lady Rozemyne’s departure, I shall become Brunhilde’s retainer and oversee the sending of our duchy’s books to the Sovereignty.”

Now that Lieseleta had made her intentions clear, only one of my retainers had yet to speak: Angelica. Everyone’s eyes naturally turned to her.

“Angelica, what do *you* intend to do?” I asked.

She cocked her head at me. “What do you think I should do, Lady Rozemyne?”

Er... you’re supposed to make up your own mind. This choice is going to decide your entire future, you know!

As I agonized over Angelica’s stalwart refusal to think for herself, Lieseleta giggled. “Sister, I believe you should go to the Sovereignty with Lady Rozemyne. Our parents would prefer that to you marrying Lord Bonifatius, and the Sovereign knights are sure to be much stronger than Ehrenfest’s.”

“I’m going,” Angelica declared without another moment’s hesitation. I really wished she would take a bit more—well, *any*—time to think about this. Karstedt and Elvira had considered it necessary to hold an entire family conference to decide her marriage partner, and they had agreed that she would marry either Traugott or Bonifatius. How was this decision going to affect that?

“But, Angelica... Your marriage...” I said.

“I don’t care if I never take a husband,” she replied coolly. “And I think you’re the only one I would ever be able to serve.”

That may be true, but did you really need to put on such a dashing expression? You're acting like you just said something really cool.

As I debated whether it was even acceptable to take Angelica's answer at face value, Cornelius offered me a helping hand. "Angelica's engagement concerns both Grandfather and our parents, so it would be best to consult them before making any decisions. We'll need to have a discussion at home about your adoption being nullified, right? We can bring this up then as well."

"You're right," I said. "We must consult our parents about this. Cornelius, could you speak with Father—or perhaps request a meeting with the aub—so that I can confirm whether I'm allowed to tell Mother about my adoption?"

Sending a letter was too risky—there was always a chance that one scholar or another might end up reading it. Communicating through Cornelius was a much better option, since he could engage in private conversations with not just Karstedt but Sylvester as well.

"If you obtain permission," I continued, "then arrange a time for us to speak with Father and Mother. Ask if we can discuss Angelica's move to the Sovereignty during the same meeting."

"Leave that to me and get some rest. Now that we've each said our piece, we can return to our everyday duties, right?"

I merely blinked, not having expected that at all.

Cornelius went on, "Your discussion with the archducal family really drained you, didn't it? Damuel"—he gestured to the man in question—"was worried when he saw you come out. He said you looked sickly."

"He did...?"

"Get some rest," Cornelius repeated, then took his leave.

Did everyone really think I was sick? None of my attendants had said anything. I couldn't help but feel strange as I went over to Damuel, who was waiting by the door, and asked, "Damuel, do I truly look unwell...?"

"It was, uh... more to do with your demeanor than your appearance." He floundered, clearly struggling to choose his next words, then leaned forward and whispered, "You looked as emotional as when you were first trailing behind Lord Ferdinand in the temple. But if I spoke out of turn, I apologize."

"I... didn't think you would notice..."

After seeing the love and consideration that Sylvester and Florencia had shown Wilfried, I'd really longed to have someone to

lean on—someone I could actually be vulnerable with. In hindsight, I'd probably felt as alone as when I'd spent my first winter in the temple.

"I'm going to write a letter to Ferdinand in my hidden room," I said.

"That can wait until tomorrow," Lieseleta insisted. "You really do not look well. Or would you rather have Lord Ferdinand scold you?"

She took the message-containing shumil, which I'd taken to calling Mr. Lecture, from where it was sitting by the fireplace and promptly activated it. "Listen to your retainers," it chided me.

Prerecorded or not, hearing Ferdinand admonish me eased some of the tension I was feeling. I went to listen to more, but Lieseleta took the shumil away and said, "Let us prepare for bed, Lady Rozemyne. He can scold you again after."

She got me ready in the blink of an eye, then tucked me into bed with Mr. Lecture. She really seemed to care about the shumil, at least based on how carefully she slotted it under my arm. Then, after adjusting its positioning a few times, she gave several satisfied nods and went on her way.

As I snuggled up to Mr. Lecture, I played one admonitory message after another until sleep finally took hold of me. It was nice, but it also made me crave a "very good" or two in my library's hidden room.

At Karstedt's Estate

Lieseleta had today off. As it stood, Gretia was the only one of my attendants set to accompany me to the Sovereignty, so Otilie was training her as part of the handover. I watched them out of the corner of my eye while moving to my hidden room, but before I could make it—

“Lady Rozemyne. Good morning. Here is my name.”

“Hartmut? You really did make the preparations in a single night...”

Hartmut had presented me with his name stone, wearing a smile that was equal parts heart-throbbingly handsome and heart-chillingly creepy. Otilie was supposed to be overseeing the name-swearing ritual, but she screwed up her nose and turned away.

Otilie! Don't neglect your duties! At least you're not the one he's staring at!

The name-swearing itself ended up being even worse; despite the fact that everyone else grimaced with pain when giving their name, Hartmut pretty much gasped, “So this is Lady Rozemyne's mana...” and made a face of complete and utter bliss as it gradually bound him. It was so terrifying that I practically threw the rest of my mana at him, my eyes brimming with tears as I tried to complete the ritual as quickly as I could.

Ngh... That was supposed to hurt, but Hartmut wore a dreamy smile from start to finish! I'm not sure I could be any more freaked out.

“Clarissa doesn't have the necessary materials on hand, so she will need to perform hers later,” Hartmut informed me. “I cannot even begin to describe the regret I saw in her eyes.”

“I see...”

Clarissa might have been disappointed, but I considered it a lucky break. Performing that ceremony twice in one day was as good as asking to be bedridden from exhaustion.

“I am going to my hidden room to write,” I said.

“Understood,” Hartmut replied. “May I have your permission to leave for a bit and gather some intelligence?”

“Do as you please.”

I got away from Hartmut and his eerily delighted smile at the earliest opportunity and went straight into my hidden room, whereupon I used my invisible ink to write a letter to Ferdinand. I told him that, as payment for my hard work translating in the underground archive, I’d managed to secure him a hidden room and immunity from Detlinde’s crimes. Sylvester and the royal family would confirm whether his living conditions had actually improved during the summer funeral. I also detailed our discoveries about the silver cloth that the previous Giebe Gerlach had used, and mentioned that Ehrenfest’s knights were now carrying normal weapons to use alongside their schtappes. There was also the phrase that Hortensia had said to Detlinde, which I still didn’t understand.

All in all, I think this is a pretty informative letter. I didn’t write anything about my new adoption or being a Zent candidate, but I managed to include everything else that feels important.

Indeed, it was perfectly in line with our rule of not leaking information to other duchies. I nodded several times in satisfaction. This would do.

For the visible section of my letter, I made sure to focus on things that nobody would think twice about. I offered my condolences on Aub Ahrensbach’s passing, expressed my usual concerns about Ferdinand’s health, noted that Sylvester would deliver the requested luggage during the summer funeral, and said that I would include sweets for Letizia, among other things. All that remained was to wait for the ink to dry.

I exited my hidden room, leaving my letter to Ferdinand inside, to find Cornelius waiting outside for me. “Lady Rozemyne, I’m here with a message from Mother,” he said. “She wishes to discuss the handover with you at your earliest convenience, and she proposed that you have dinner with her tomorrow. Will that suit your schedule? She has also proposed that you stay the night.”

I asked Otilie to get everything ready for the meal and my sleepover; tomorrow was going to be my first trip home in quite a while. In the meantime, I wrote a bunch more letters to a bunch of places.

I wrote to Brigitte in Illgner, asking her workshops to prepare as much fey paper as they could, then bring it to the castle as soon as possible.

I wrote to my library attendant, Lasfam, informing him of the

letter we had received from Ferdinand during the Archduke Conference. I also explained that, henceforth, he would need to liaise with Sylvester about any luggage being moved to Ahrensbach, including that due to be transported during the summer funeral. Naturally, I also made sure to note my success in negotiating for Ferdinand to receive better living conditions and a guarantee that he wouldn't be punished for Detlinde's actions.

Last of all, I wrote to the temple, notifying them that I would return before the coming-of-age ceremonies and that our report covering this year's Archduke Conference would need to be done via letter, since the merchants were already so busy. There wasn't much for us to discuss, in any case; we weren't offering any more merchant slots than last year, and everyone's priority right now was preparing Groschel to be renovated.

But I'll need to tell at least Benno that I'm going to the Sovereignty. Lutz is in Kirnberger right now, so...

This was a matter of the utmost importance, so I would invite Benno to my orphanage director's chambers in secret and explain the circumstances to him in my hidden room. With so many more name-sworn retainers among my entourage, I could even swear them to secrecy and allow them to join.

"Welcome home, Lady Rozemyne," said the attendants of the Karstedt estate. I'd arrived with Cornelius, Leonore, Lieseleta, and Angelica.

Lieseleta was still supposed to be on vacation, but she had received a direct invitation from Elvira. In short, my mother knew that trying to have a frank conversation with Angelica was pointless, and since the finer details of our situation were still confidential, consulting her parents was out of the question. That was why she had turned to Lieseleta, who was both the successor to her house and one of the few people privy to my circumstances.

Angelica is technically still invited, but I'm sure Mother doesn't actually care whether she's here or not. She just needs Lieseleta.

Bonifatius was at the dinner table as well. Our attendants were busy moving around to serve us, so we stuck to more mundane topics of conversation, such as the printing industry and its future.

After the meal, our attendants prepared some wine and tea before taking their leave. Once they were gone, Karstedt activated an area-affecting magic tool and got straight to the point:

"I told Elvira everything—with the aub's permission, of course. There won't be a need for any further explanations. Now, I believe Angelica is our first topic of discussion."

"That's right," I said. "It was decided that she would marry either Traugott or Grandfather so that her canceled engagement to Eckhart wouldn't damage her reputation, correct?"

In response, Bonifatius muttered, "I continue to hope that Traugott matures quickly so that he can marry her in my stead..." He obviously wasn't very enthusiastic about wedding someone who was both in service to and more or less the same age as his granddaughter.

If you want Traugott to surpass you, why did you perform the ritual to obtain more divine protections?

"However," I continued, "Angelica now wishes to move to the Sovereignty. Mother, Father, with her agreed-upon engagement in mind, I thought it best that we ask you how we should proceed and whether it would be acceptable for me to keep her as my guard knight."

Elvira praised me for not having made the decision on my own, then looked to Lieseleta. "How does your house feel about this?" she asked.

"Both the engagement to Lord Eckhart and your promised compensation for its nullification were far beyond what a mednoble house would ever deserve. Thus, as long as the good relationship between our families remains, we have no particular desires when it comes to my sister's marriage. Being the retainer of a princess is enough of an honor, and she is already looking forward to training with the Sovereign Knight's Order. If possible, we would ask that her wish to move be granted."

Lieseleta then turned to Angelica, who merely smiled and nodded.

Elvira knew not to expect Angelica to behave like a regular noblewoman, so she approved the request without further ado. "If moving to the Sovereignty as a guard knight is what Angelica wishes to do, she has our permission. Recompense can be discussed with your parents at a later date. Now, Cornelius... what do you and Leonore plan to do?"

With a loud *clunk*, Bonifatius set his wine-filled glass down on the table. "GO TO THE SOVEREIGNTY!" he roared. "PROTECT ROZEMYNE!"

“Um... Mother was asking them, not you...” I noted. It was painfully obvious that he’d drunk too much.

Bonifatius’s eyes shot wide open. “I would go with you, Rozemyne! I would! But archducal family members can’t become guard knights *or* move to the Sovereignty! WHO MADE THESE LAWS?!”

“That would be Zent Gesetzkette, who ruled the country long ago. We covered that in law class.”

“Curse you, Zent Gesetzkette! You’ve ruined everything!”

Karstedt sighed. “It would reassure us all to know that you had Cornelius in the Sovereignty with you, but thinking about how our Knight’s Order will compensate for his absence gives me a bit of a headache...”

Now that Ferdinand and Eckhart were gone, Cornelius played quite a key role in hunting the Lord of Winter. Losing him too would have serious consequences.

“In that case,” I ventured, “perhaps he and Leonore should stay. Then—”

“No, Rozemyne!” Bonifatius interrupted, shaking his head. “That won’t be a concern. Ever since you revived that ancient Dunkelfelger ritual, we’ve been beginning our fights by seeking the divine protections of several gods at once. You’ve also given us your compression method, which is allowing the knights to slowly obtain more mana; demonstrated the value of prayer at the Royal Academy; and given us a way to repeat the divine protections ritual during the Archduke Conference. Those who work harder will be able to grow stronger, and the knights who come of age henceforth will only continue to increase in quality. Not to mention, with the ingredients we got from our gathering spot during the conference, it’s going to be even easier for us to make magic tools and rejuvenation potions! Ehrenfest’s current lack of strength is no reason to reduce the quality of your own guards. If working hard is all that’s required, then that’s what we’ll do!”

“Indeed,” Elvira said. “Lord Bonifatius is entirely correct. It would also be pitiable beyond words to have a new princess arrive at the Sovereignty without any archnobles among her knights. Those at the Royal Academy know that her elder brother has been filling that role thus far, so I would ask that he stay by her side.”

“But Elvira...” Karstedt began. As the personal guard of the archduke himself, he had a better understanding of the duchy’s

knights than anyone—but he was still shut down without a moment's hesitation.

"How could Cornelius choose not to accompany Rozemyne now, when she needs him most?" Elvira asked. "He chose to serve her, and what kind of a knight fails to serve his own lady? Take our own Lamprecht, for example—he receives nonstop criticism from Lord Wilfried for failing to manipulate Rozemyne or contain the Leisegangs, but he continues to protect his lord nonetheless. I do not recall raising someone who would abandon his charge in her time of need." It was perfectly clear that she was the mother of a family of knights.

Cornelius tightened his expression and nodded. "I, too, consider it best for me to move to the Sovereignty. Seeing the state of the royal family and the Sovereign Knight's Order during the Archduke Conference convinced me that Rozemyne should not go there without as much protection as possible."

"Quite," Leonore agreed. "The trug-affected were punished, it would seem, but it remains a concern that the source has not been found. I can at least take comfort in the knowledge that Matthias is going to the Sovereignty as well, given his sensitivity to the scent."

So Cornelius and Leonore were both set on accompanying me. The problem was deciding what to do about the timing of their wedding. Cornelius would also need to consider his plans for the estate he had received from Eckhart.

"Leonore will need to quit her job upon getting married," Elvira said, "so you will need two years of preparation time, as was originally the plan. After you move to the Sovereignty, find more female knights for Rozemyne within the year. I shall tend Eckhart's estate, such that it can be used whenever you or he returns."

Cornelius offered a small smile and said, "Perhaps it would be better to give the place to Siegrecht." He was, of course, referring to Lamprecht and Aurelia's son.

"Ah, it is much too early to consider an option like that. He has only recently begun to crawl, you know."

"Mother," I interjected, "I have yet to even meet Siegrecht." I'd hoped that I would at least be able to glimpse him now that I was back at the estate, but neither Lamprecht nor Aurelia was anywhere to be seen, so the same was naturally true of their baby.

"Everyone has become a lot more guarded since Bettina from Ahrensbach was imprisoned during the purge," Elvira explained.

“Aurelia has become especially wary in order to protect her child, and you have so many retainers whom she does not know. For that reason, she is unlikely to feel comfortable enough to meet with you—but I can assure you that she rejoiced when she received your gift. In any case, this is a discussion for another time; we must prioritize preparing for your departure.”

Elvira went on to request the names of the retainers due to accompany me to the Sovereignty. I divided them into three groups: those who were definitely coming with me, those who were definitely staying behind, and those who were still unsure. She nodded all the while, then let out a heavy sigh and turned to Lieseleta.

“Gretia only recently became Rozemyne’s retainer, correct? It seems much too unreasonable to have her be the only attendant going to the Sovereignty. Attendants serve their lord or lady more intimately than any other kind of retainer, and your lady will struggle to relax even in her own room if she does not have someone she trusts and who has plenty of experience there with her. Lieseleta, is there no way for you to go?”

“Mother, Lieseleta is her house’s successor, and she is already engaged to Wilfried’s scholar Thorsten,” I said, explaining the situation on Lieseleta’s behalf so that she wouldn’t be criticized. “She cannot leave Ehrenfest.”

Elvira looked openly exasperated, then shook her head. “Of course she would say that when the flow of information is being restricted and she cannot consult her parents or her fiancé. You asked everyone what they wanted to do but did not state your own desires, I expect?”

“No, but... I *couldn't* state my desires. Would my retainers not have interpreted them as an order?”

If someone of a higher status made a request, then those who ranked below them had no choice but to obey. That was why I had asked my retainers what *they* wanted instead of stating what I wanted from each of them.

“Respecting others’ wishes is important,” Elvira said, “but so is making your own wishes clear. Those in your service are unlikely to move to the Sovereignty unless they are completely certain that you want them to join you. If you tell me now that you desire Lieseleta’s continued service, and she expresses a desire to follow you, then I will do the necessary legwork to make it feasible.”

I gazed at Lieseleta. In truth, I *did* want her to come with me. She had served as my attendant since I first joined the Royal Academy, and while her work never really stood out, she always did what I needed, like a considerate hand willing to scratch an itch wherever one appeared. Having her with me would come as an immense relief.

However, upon hearing Lieseleta's original answer, I'd accepted that she was staying behind without the slightest hesitation. She was currently wearing her usual smile, but she was nowhere near as transparent as her sister; I couldn't tell whether she actually wanted to move to the Sovereignty. If I said that I wanted her to accompany me, it was likely that both sisters would cancel their engagements for my sake.

"With the duchy in its current position, I could not bear to take more people than is absolutely necessary. My retainers are all the best of the best, and I suspect they are needed here now more than ever. Lieseleta will support Brunhilde when she becomes Sylvester's second wife and will, for the sake of Ehrenfest—"

"Oh, enough of that," Elvira replied. "No matter how talented your retainers might be, the castle's daily affairs are not going to fall apart in the absence of a select few who spend so much of their time in the temple to begin with. It would be one thing if you were gathering together a massive group to form a faction in the Sovereignty, but how much harm is the loss of your personal retainers really going to cause?"

So... I needed to focus on the personal circumstances of each retainer rather than the problems facing the duchy as a whole. Elvira went on to note that a princess who moved to the Sovereignty with the smallest possible entourage would inspire the Sovereign nobles to look down on her as well as her duchy.

Elvira continued, "You are welcome to take whomever you will need to ensure your safety and emotional well-being. Now, state your wishes clearly so that they are properly understood. If you and Lieseleta are both on the same page, then as I said, I will make sure that your desires are met. I am your mother; the least I can do is grant my daughter a single wish. Now, wring a positive answer from Lieseleta and take her to the Sovereignty with you."

She then pushed me forward until Lieseleta and I were standing face-to-face. Karstedt and Bonifatius were silently cheering me on from the sidelines, Cornelius was smirking to himself, and Leonore

was watching intently as if expecting to see something truly heartwarming. Lieseleta herself was patiently waiting for me to speak, a calm smile on her face, while Angelica beside her was wearing her usual expression.

What is this, a public love confession?! Am I really supposed to ask Lieseleta to come with me when you're all acting like this?!

My cheeks grew hot and my eyes teary as everyone watched us closely. I was just barely resisting the urge to run away. If I asked Lieseleta to stay by my side, and she refused... I would probably drop dead on the spot.

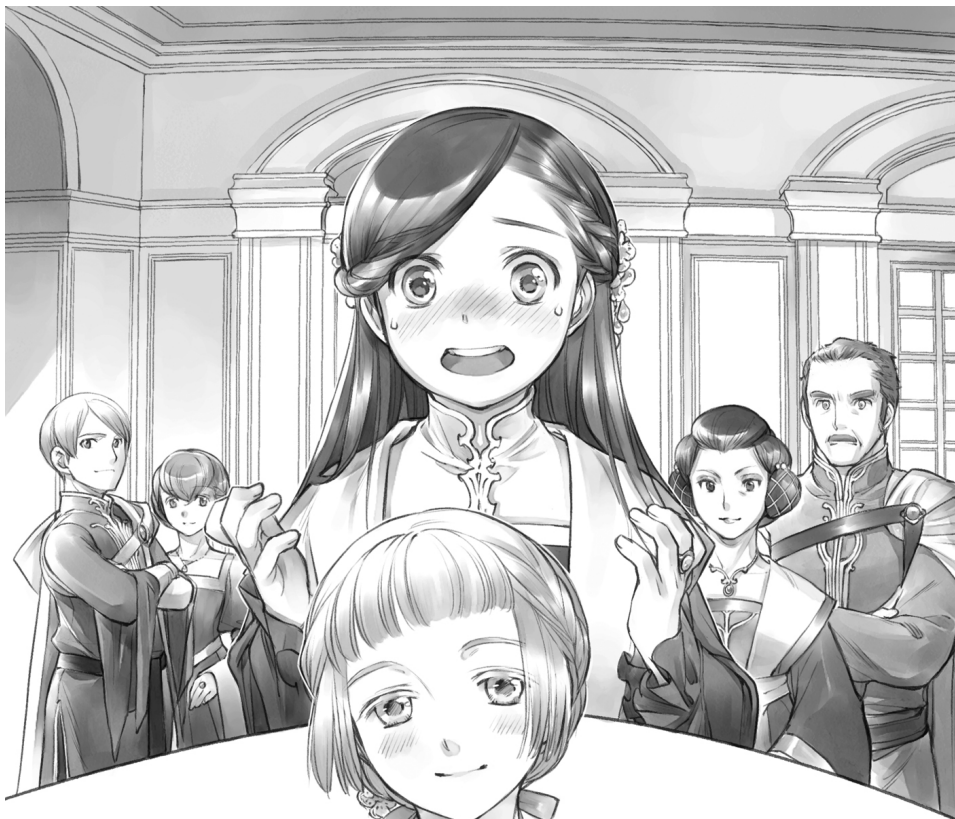
"Motherrr..."

"It is your duty to secure her approval," Elvira said, clearly amused as she went back to her own seat. "We are waiting."

I would need to say *something* to get out of my current predicament, so...

"Eep. Um... Ah... Lieseleta!"

"Yes, Lady Rozemyne?" she replied, unmistakably amused. Her dark-green eyes were narrowed in an impish smile, but as she awaited my declaration, her cheeks started to redden as well. Even amid this blur of emotions, one thing was clear to me: she wasn't feeling troubled or bothered in the slightest.



Knowing that we were both feeling embarrassed made me even more nervous, but I could sense that Lieseleta was likely to accept my request, and that gave me the courage to speak. I took a deep breath... then vomited the words out as quickly as I could.

“L-Lieseleta, if you w-would come with me to the Sovereignty... that would r-really warm my heart. I will do my best to protect you, to ensure that no ills befall you, to make sure you are not overworked, and, um... I will also raise your pay. And allow you to keep a veritable nest of shumils in your room. So, um, so, so... please come with me!”

I’d said absolutely everything that was on my mind. I wasn’t sure how, but I’d managed it.

As I exhaled, Lieseleta smiled joyfully and wiped away the tears forming in the corners of my eyes. “I would be glad to, as long as my house’s affairs can be put in order.”

I smiled in response, at which point Cornelius came over and took my hand. He was still smirking as he peered down at my flushed cheeks and said, “Rozemyne, I’d feel a lot better about going to the Sovereignty if you asked me like that as well.”

“Not happening!” I exclaimed. “Doing it once was enough!”

Mother and Daughter

By the time my embarrassing confession was over, it was late enough that Lieseleta, Leonore, and Angelica all needed to go home. In other words, our first discussion had come to an end. Cornelius and Bonifatius led the trio off, while I stood in the entrance hall.

“Mother,” I said, “I must now return to my room.”

“One moment. Allow me to join you. There is more we need to discuss.”

So Elvira accompanied me. My stay in this estate had only been brief, but my room had always been kept in order so that I could use it whenever I wanted. It really warmed my heart.

“You never did register your mana with the hidden room here, did you?” Elvira asked. “Come with me. Someone your age would never usually enter a hidden room with a parent, but let us experience it at least once before you leave. I should want you to know how to register yourself and your own children when the time comes.”

Ferdinand and I already registered our mana to a hidden room in the temple, but... I'm going to keep that to myself. I wouldn't put it past Elvira to pull a diptych out of thin air and start furiously writing down ideas.

It was so easy to imagine Elvira's eyes lighting up that I decided just to thank her and performed the registration in silence. Her eyes crinkled in a show of nostalgia as we approached the door by the bed, placed our hands on its feystone, and poured our mana into it together.

“As your mother, I would have liked to prepare this hidden room when you first arrived, in case your emotions became too much for you to bear... However, because Lord Ferdinand came to watch over you, there were no occasions when you became anxious or depressed, even though you had just come to a new home and were having to call strangers family. As a new mother to you, I determined that you would feel more at ease staying with Lord Ferdinand than holing up in a hidden room, so I missed the

opportunity to make it.”

Elvira’s hand was covering mine, and there was a pleasant warmth to her touch. I watched the mana lines race along the door, and a ticklish feeling overcame me as the hidden room started to form behind it. There was no longer a doubt in my mind; when I’d first arrived at this estate, Elvira truly had been prepared to welcome me as her own daughter.

Attendants brought a table and two chairs into the barren room, then prepared us some drinks. We were going to have our own, two-person tea party in the hidden room.

“Now, where shall we begin?” Elvira mused aloud. “I suppose we could discuss Philine and Damuel, whom I elected not to mention earlier.”

“Philine and Damuel?” I repeated, looking at her quizzically. I couldn’t think of a reason why she would wait until now to speak about them.

Elvira smiled. “I did not wish to put pressure on you while we were in the company of others. A lord or lady should have the freedom to decide what they do with their retainers. So I will state my desire, then I will accept whatever you think is best.” She seemed a bit more casual than I was used to, and it was in a relaxed tone that she continued, “Could you leave Philine and Damuel in Ehrenfest? There are many reasons for my request, but to focus on one that applies to them both—there are almost no laynobles in the Sovereignty. Were they to go with you, I suspect they would feel even more uncomfortable than they do in Ehrenfest.”

She went on to tell me that while mednobles and archnobles sometimes brought laynoble attendants to the Sovereignty with them, she had never heard of any layknights or layscholars going there. The mere suggestion of them serving a princess was therefore unthinkable. We had already agreed that I would scope out the Sovereignty for a while before deciding whether to move the Gutenbergs there. Elvira wanted us to do the same thing for Philine and Damuel.

“At the same time,” Elvira continued, “it would benefit Ehrenfest to have those who are comfortable with your methods and capable of communicating with the lower city stay here even longer. There are grave concerns that your departure will cause the duchy’s nobles to revert to their old ways.”

Only a select few people had a good grasp on my methods and

could properly interact with the lower city. Indeed, here in Ehrenfest, Philine and Damuel were very much in demand.

Although our plan was to finish the printing industry handover during the next year, that wouldn't be enough time for us to fully rework noble culture. Elvira also believed that Brunhilde would struggle to stay in constant contact with the lower city after becoming the duchy's second wife.

"The same is true for the temple handover," she said. "Philine and Damuel have spent a tremendous amount of time by your side, assisting Lord Ferdinand with his work. Having them stay will make an enormous difference. As it stands, Lord Melchior and his retainers will be forced to bear a crushing burden."

Melchior was going to have his hands full with rituals, sure, but I really didn't expect there to be any issues with the temple's administration; I planned to leave him my temple attendants, and some of the blue priests like Kampfner and Frietack were already doing impressive amounts of work. But when I said as much to Elvira, she gave me a half-smile and shook her head.

"You might not agree with this, since you were raised in the temple, but retainers of the archducal family will not want to ask the blue priests to educate them. It is a matter of pride. Laynobles are still nobles, and while they will not hesitate to learn from fellow archducal retainers..."

As a former commoner, I didn't see the blue priests as so beneath me that I would be loath to ask them for advice. Again, though, my common sense as a noble was flawed. Elvira explained that, to ensure the temple handover went smoothly, I would need to be more considerate of Melchior's retainers.

"Hartmut was taught by Lord Ferdinand, correct?" she asked. "I originally intended to have him stay in Ehrenfest as both the High Priest and an archnoble who could intimidate other nobles, but he gave you his name before I could even approach him. I suppose you *will* need an archscholar with you, so there is nothing to be done about that."

To think Hartmut was one step ahead of Mother all along... I mused. His reasons for forcing his name on me were evidently more complex than I'd imagined.

Elvira continued, "If you wish to keep Philine and Damuel with you despite the many reasons to leave them here, might I suggest moving them to the Sovereignty with the Gutenbergs once you

come of age?”

“Excuse me?”

“The Gutenbergs cannot be moved right away—and in the meantime, will you not want people here who know about your circumstances? This will prove crucial if you wish to keep your *true* family safe, you know.”

I gasped.

Elvira’s eyes widened, then she laughed. “Goodness, what is with that expression? I have known you were a commoner since the day I took you in. They would not tell me whose daughter you were, but it took only a bit of probing into the commoners you hold so dear to figure that out as well.”

“Excuse me? *Excuse me?!?*”

Nobody had told me that Elvira knew my secret. I’d tried to pass myself off as a genuine noble whenever I was around her, but she’d known I was a commoner the entire time? I could hardly believe it.

“You intend to move your family to the Sovereignty alongside the Gutenbergs, correct? I believe Damuel is best suited to protect them until that day comes.”

“But why wait for when I come of age?” It was true that I would need to inspect the Sovereignty first, but I wouldn’t come of age for another three years. The handover would take one year, but waiting two more after that felt superfluous, especially when I wanted to relocate the printing industry right away.

“Why? Good grief, Rozemyne... I understand that your current lifestyle and Aub Ehrenfest’s flexibility make you prone to forget this, but underage children are not normally entrusted with major industries. You would do well to understand that you will not have the same freedom with businesses and the like in the Sovereignty as you do here.”

Sylvester had always given me the freedom to do as I pleased, since I’d started the industry in the first place, but the duchy was supposed to be in charge. Those who had yet to come of age would normally have this manner of work taken from them.

“Furthermore, Karstedt has told me that you are currently the Zent candidate closest to obtaining the Grutrissheit. Does it not follow, then, that you will need to take care of all sorts of duties before you can even consider diving into the printing industry? You are going to be educated as a royal and such, I imagine.”

“Ah!”

That hadn’t even crossed my mind. I’d assumed that I would be able to do whatever I wanted after obtaining the Grutrissheit, handing it to Sigiswald, and saving Ferdinand—assuming that I could obtain the Grutrissheit in the first place—but it was more likely that I would be thrown straight into a royal education.

“Will you truly manage as a princess, Rozemyne?” Elvira asked, inspecting me with doubtful eyes.

“Ngh...” I groaned, and slumped my shoulders. Not even I thought I would manage, but things were being decided and moving forward anyway. There was no helping it.

“There are also other reasons to wait. Philine will come of age at the same time as you, allowing her to move to the Sovereignty without giving her name. I should not need to tell you that I do not condone name-swearing being used as a means of moving to the Sovereignty—and to speak truthfully, I do not believe you should take responsibility for any more lives.” Seeing all of the orphans and my name-sworn retainers had apparently made Elvira worry that I was biting off more than I could chew.

“But I was the one who took Philine as a retainer and got her away from the trouble she was facing at home,” I replied. “I cannot make her go back there.” Returning her to that house with her father and stepmother was unthinkable.

“Philine is the proper successor to her house; her father merely married into the family. Thus, it would be easy to return the house to her. Or, if not, I could always look after her as I do Muriella. I should note, though—if she does go to the Sovereignty, she will need to be engaged to ensure her protection. How would you feel about pairing her with Damuel?”

“WHAAA?!”

Her suggestion had come so out of the blue that I’d cried out despite myself.

Elvira watched me for a moment, clearly amused. Because laynobles were seldom seen in the Sovereignty, she explained, Philine and Damuel would need to rely on each other for support. “I expect there will be no shortage of nobles trying to approach your retainers, so Philine might have other options... but at this rate, Damuel will struggle to take a wife at all.”

“Um, would it not be possible for Damuel to wed a mednoble?” I asked, hopeful that climbing a rank was in the cards for him. “I’m

told he has the mana quantity of a lesser mednoble, so I thought he might manage somehow...”

Elvira blinked. “He may have talent and your highest praise, but his public reputation leaves much to be desired. As far as anyone is concerned, he is a disgraced laynoble who might be removed from your service at any time. Not even the most generous mednobles would want to marry him. Yes, there was his romance with Brigitte, but that came to be under what were frankly miraculous circumstances: Brigitte’s own reputation was damaged after she abruptly canceled her engagement and started visiting the temple, she had an opportunity to get close to Damuel through work, her brother—Giebe Illgner—had wanted to foster a good relationship with you, she was getting old enough that no other men were approaching her, *and* she had shown a burning desire to repopulate her house.”

She was right—it *was* unwise to base my expectations for Damuel on his previous relationship with Brigitte. Instead, I tried to imagine him with Philine. They were definitely close, and while it was possible that Philine was more taken with the *idea* of being in love, I’d gotten the impression that she at least had some feelings for him.

Damuel, however...

“Damuel once said that Philine had feelings for Roderick, so... this might be difficult. He clearly treats her like a child and does not see her as a potential spouse in the slightest.”

“I see. I thought they would make for a wonderful couple—a knight graciously looking after a lonely young woman who had cut ties with her family and wished to follow after her lady. He would have protected her until adulthood, their feelings for one another growing all the while, but alas...”

“Mother, is that material for your next book?” I asked, my cheeks puffed out. “You are taking far too much inspiration from my retainers.”

Elvira took out a diptych and started to write, a distinct sparkle in her dark eyes. “It certainly is important to note down ideas as they spring to mind, lest you forget them. In any case, do inform Damuel of my suggestion. The most I can do is arrange a prospective bride and offer my best wishes for how their relationship develops. I will not be involved in the final decision—that is for them to make.”

I considered Elvira's proposal. She had said that she could take Philine into her care while we made our arrangements, but she had said nothing about looking after Damuel.

"Mother, will my absence thrust Damuel into an unstable position?" I asked. "Would you care for him as well as Philine?"

She cast her eyes upward. "I would be able to protect him to some extent, assuming that he and Philine were engaged, but... it is best to leave men to their own kind, Rozemyne. Might I suggest entrusting him to Lord Bonifatius, so that he might preserve his connection to the archducal family? He will need to undergo a lot of training before he can move to the Sovereignty. If he continues to train while commuting to the temple, I expect he will not receive any harsh words from the nobility."

"Very well. I will ask Grandfather to look after him if Damuel wishes it."

I was relieved to know that Elvira had, in fact, been thinking of ways to help Damuel as well. But as I was admiring her kindness, her dark eyes sparkled again, and a teasing smile crept onto her face—the same one that Cornelius had given me a short while ago.

"Rozemyne, Lord Bonifatius will accept in a heartbeat if you ask him as adorably as you did Lieseleta."

"Mother!" I exclaimed, fixing her with the firmest glare I could manage.

Elvira laughed off my complaint and returned to her diptych, scribbling down something or other. Then she looked up, sighed, and sipped from her teacup with a satisfied smile. "Not that long ago, if someone had told me I would one day have the freedom to indulge in my hobbies, I would never have believed them. I am ever so grateful to you."

"Hm...?"

"The years before you came were my hardest, Rozemyne. Would you care to hear about them?"

I nodded. Though I already knew bits and pieces about Elvira's past, I'd never heard the full story.

"My wedding to Karstedt came about from the Leisegangs' desperation to protect themselves from Lady Veronica. We were not particularly close, nor were we particularly antagonistic to one another, so our marriage came entirely out of obligation. However, Lady Veronica's attendant Trudeliede became his second wife, then he independently decided to take Rozemary as his third, throwing

our house into chaos.”

Anytime the second and third wives had butted heads, Karstedt had always shown favoritism to Rozemary. Elvira had thus needed to maintain the balance by allying with Trudeliede, thereby maintaining appearances for Veronica.

“Soon after Rozemary’s passing, Trudeliede bore a child. Lady Veronica rejoiced at the news, declaring the baby to be best suited to become Lord Karstedt’s successor. I felt myself steadily being pushed out of my position and driven into a corner.”

Lord Adelbert had taken ill not long after, and Veronica’s dominance had reached its peak. Meanwhile, at Karstedt’s estate, Rozemary’s death had started a war between Elvira and Trudeliede, wherein the second wife was borrowing her lady’s power. Karstedt had started using work as an excuse to avoid going home.

I’m well aware that power struggles are a pain, but come on, Father! That’s just wrong!

“Then, the previous archduke Lord Adelbert passed away. Lord Ferdinand lost his shield and entered the temple, succumbing to Lady Veronica’s pressure, while Eckhart, who had sworn his name to the young lord, quickly fell into despair. It was Heidemarie who supported him during this low point.”

Eckhart had married Heidemarie, and the subsequent reveal that she was pregnant had seemed to cheer him up considerably. But then she was poisoned, and in the blink of an eye, Eckhart lost both his wife and unborn child. The tragedy took a heavier toll on him than anyone could bear to witness.

“I never knew...” I muttered.

“Eckhart had just started to get back on his feet when you arrived, and it was not the right time for any of us to tell you.”

Even when Eckhart was still despondent, Veronica had probed Elvira about having him serve Wilfried as a guard knight. Elvira had declined, saying that her son was in no state for such a position—so Veronica had instead made the same demand of Sylvester and Karstedt.

“They both refused as well, for various reasons,” Elvira explained. “It turned into something quite miserable; Lady Veronica would say that I’d failed to raise Eckhart properly, that swearing loyalty to Lord Ferdinand was treason to the archduke, and so on. Lamprecht, well aware of the situation, volunteered to take the position himself, since he would be of age by the time Lord Wilfried

was baptized.”

In other words, Lamprecht had accepted the burden to end the suffering his mother and brother were going through.

“At once, Lady Veronica overwhelmed Lamprecht with unreasonable demands. He was to court Ahrensbach nobles and take one as his bride, and to know that guard knights must show complete obedience to their lord at all times. I protested what our son was going through, but Karstedt did not listen to me particularly closely.”

Bemoaning what Lamprecht was having to endure, Elvira had implored her husband to speak with Sylvester about improving the situation. Sylvester had barely listened to him, though. And in any case, Karstedt had known about Elvira’s long-standing conflict with Veronica, so he had merely laughed it off and remarked that Wilfried was just like young Sylvester in his tendency to run away from everything.

Oof... That’s all too easy to imagine.

“As he grew up, Cornelius saw his two elder brothers being dragged about by their lords and resolved never to take one himself. He stopped trying with his studies, which was so very frustrating to see. I knew he had the potential to go far, but he refused to take anything seriously.”

Oh yeah... At the start, Cornelius hadn’t been an honor student or anything.

I thought back to before the Raise Angelica’s Grades Squadron, when he had said that he needed grades fit for an archnoble and nothing more.

“Lord Adelbert’s death enabled Lady Veronica to wield her power even more flagrantly. Haldenzel, my home province, faced ever tighter constraints, while the Leisegangs lost more and more power. I spent each day in misery, unable to envision a future that did not end with Lady Veronica crushing my sons and me.”

Now that I knew more about noble society, I understood just how terribly awkward life must have been for Elvira. She was the first wife of the knight commander, but she had been on bad terms with the archduke’s mother and struggled to communicate with both her husband and the aub himself.

“It was then that Lady Veronica was suddenly detained,” Elvira said. “Lord Sylvester had moved against her, despite our assumption that he had chosen to remain his mother’s puppet.”

After making an announcement regarding the movement of nobles from other duchies, Sylvester had disappeared over and over again, often for days at a time. Soon, the Noble's Quarter was abuzz with rumors that something had happened to the aub. He had then made an abrupt return midway through the Archduke Conference, whereupon he dismissed the High Bishop, whom his mother had always protected, and sent Veronica to the Ivory Tower as punishment for her misdeeds.

"Karstedt similarly returned from the Archduke Conference and spent countless days busily dealing with Ehrenfest's criminals. Even after witnessing it with my own eyes, I could not comprehend what was happening."

Thinking about it from a noble's perspective, what Sylvester did really was insane. Even I'm taken aback. Like, he chose to do all that during the Archduke Conference, of all times?

"Amid the chaos, Karstedt suddenly told me that the commoner shrine maiden responsible for Lady Veronica's deposition was going to be baptized into our family. He said that the aub would adopt her immediately afterward, so it would not place too much of a burden on me."

"Whaaat?!" I exclaimed. "You were about to become my mother; no matter how swiftly I might have been adopted afterward, it wouldn't have reduced the amount of work forced upon you, both before *and* after my adoption."

"Indeed. The carelessness of men..."

Despite that inconvenience, Elvira had agreed to the arrangement for a number of reasons: I was the cause of Veronica's downfall; I possessed an abundance of mana, which had contributed to the full chalices being sent to Haldenzel; and Ferdinand, my active guardian, had personally asked her to accept.

"Still," I said, "I'm surprised you went along with it. Taking a commoner as your daughter couldn't have been easy..."

"I debated it for some time, but then Karstedt ventured that your joining the archducal family would make it far more likely for your guardian, Lord Ferdinand, to return to noble society when the time was right. Eckhart rejoiced upon hearing this. It was my first time seeing him smile in so long—longer than I could remember. Your adoption would help both Lord Ferdinand and my son, and that was reason enough to accept you. I would never have guessed how much more you would do for me."

Eckhart had gotten a new lease on life when Ferdinand eventually returned to noble society. In his elation, he had even started visiting the temple to serve his lord there as well. Lamprecht was similarly saved when I helped his lord, Wilfried, escape disinheritance—even if only by the skin of his teeth. My introduction of so many new trends had allowed Elvira's faction to crush the women of the Veronica faction, while Cornelius's efforts to help Angelica with her studies had done wonders for his own grades.

Elvira continued, "The printing industry has allowed me to devote so much time to my hobbies, not to mention the wealth it has brought Haldenzel. After your adoption, everything in my life began to go well. Even my marriage became far more than just an obligation. As we discussed how we would raise you, Karstedt and I came to develop a more genuine connection."

Ever since the first time I'd seen them together, I'd assumed that Karstedt and Elvira had a good relationship—at least for one born from a political engagement. But apparently that hadn't always been the case.

My move to Karstedt's estate had prompted Ferdinand to visit every few days, which had in turn prompted Karstedt to spend more time at home. He had also needed to play a more active role in my education; because he had accepted me into his house and made a promise to Ferdinand that he would care for me, he hadn't been able to defer all of my questions to Elvira as he had always done with his sons. There also hadn't been much time before my baptism where I would be adopted by the archduke, and my complete lack of noble common sense had required him and Elvira to actually work together.

"I was—and still am—grateful to you, and it was my every intention to support you as your mother. However, I could see that you felt more at ease in the temple with Lord Ferdinand, and it seemed unnecessary to force you to spend time with me instead. Especially when you had your adoptive mother, Lady Florencia, waiting for you in the castle."

In the end, Elvira had decided that she would simply watch over me, ready to be my safety net if ever the need arose. There hadn't been much to worry about with Ferdinand looking after me... but then a royal decree had sent him to Ahrensbach.

"I was deeply concerned when you lost your pillar of support,

but I was also at a loss for what to do. Given your age, I did not want to overstep any boundaries. It would have been one thing to give him a proper farewell after a reasonable preparation period, but his departure came so suddenly and at such a bad time..."

I'd needed to return to the Royal Academy right after Ferdinand departed, so Elvira had resolved to keep a watchful eye on me once again. She would wait and see whether I got back on my own feet during the academic year and whether Wilfried, my fiancé, stepped up to support me now that Ferdinand was gone. From there, she would determine whether it was best to reach out to me as my mother.

"In preparation for the purge," she said, "Lord Ferdinand tasked me with laying the groundwork necessary to keep the Leisegangs in check. But when winter socializing began and we had just begun to contact them, unexpected news from the Royal Academy required us to start the purge early. The proper foundations had yet to be laid, so the Leisegangs got much more carried away than expected."

To resolve this, Brunhilde had agreed to become Sylvester's second wife and to work with Elvira to contain the Leisegangs. The purge had put its elders in exceptionally high spirits, but they were expected to calm down as time went on.

And yet, before the dust had even begun to settle, Wilfried had stated his intention to visit the Leisegangs during Spring Prayer to earn their support.

"As you might recall, Lamprecht tried to stop him, stating that none of the necessary preparations had been made... but Lord Wilfried went through with his plan nonetheless."

To nobody's surprise, Wilfried managed only to stoke the flames. Elvira explained that Giebe Leisegang had contacted her afterward, informing her that the elders were uncontrollably furious. The harrowing news had made the blood drain from her face.

So she had gone to Brunhilde, and the two had started to discuss ways to contain the Leisegangs once again. But then the Archduke Conference had arrived, and my adoption by the king had been decided.

"The situation keeps changing before I can even find my feet," Elvira lamented. "I am impressed that Lord Ferdinand was able to keep up with you for so long."

Things might not have been too bad if the duchy were at peace,

but the purge had brought about great unrest. To make matters worse, Ferdinand, the one person who had been keeping everything under control, was gone. Elvira felt his absence all too keenly.

"I must admit," she continued with a sad smile, "it has crossed my mind countless times that we might have been able to keep Lord Ferdinand in Ehrenfest if only we had made him your fiancé instead of Wilfried. It is too late for that now, though..."

I sipped my tea and gave her a small smile. "I cannot imagine being engaged to Ferdinand. My focus has only been on ways to rescue him if something were to happen in Ahrensbach."

"You have already ensured that he will not be punished alongside Lady Detlinde, correct? Excellent work." She reached out, stroked my cheek, and said, "You truly have done well."

I couldn't help but lean into her kind, gentle hand. "This is the first time anyone has praised me for... for that negotiation..." I murmured, casting my eyes down as a sudden warmth spread through my chest. Tears streamed down my cheeks without warning.

"Well, it was an act of compassion for someone in another duchy—nobody can praise you openly for that, nor would they think to in private. This will most likely be the only time I can say this, but... your actions have made my heart soar with joy. By rescuing Lord Ferdinand, you have saved not one life but three."

My actions had apparently saved Eckhart and Justus as well as Ferdinand. I nodded, mentally adding Lasfam to that list.

"Those three are safe thanks to you and what you have accomplished," Elvira concluded. "Be proud."

"Mother..."

"It is only natural to worry for someone who has moved away—especially when you know their life is in danger. Of course, such concerns should not be made public, but... I worry about Eckhart and Lord Ferdinand as well. Rihyarda is definitely concerned about Justus."

It had seemed to me as if nobody in Ehrenfest cared about Ferdinand, Eckhart, and Justus now that they had moved to Ahrensbach, but that wasn't true—those who cared were just better at keeping their feelings to themselves. Knowing that put me at ease.

"I was told not to worry about Ferdinand and the others," I said. "It seemed as though everyone else had stopped caring about

them entirely... and that really hurt. That was when I started to get so stubborn, I think. If nobody else was going to look out for them, then I would do it all on my own.”

Elvira looked down, her eyes now brimming with tears. “My daughter is being adopted by the king, and one of my sons has been handpicked to serve as her royal retainer. Once we leave this room, I will not be allowed to show anything but pride for these accomplishments. So... permit me this brief opportunity to grieve over my two children moving so far away.”

“Oh, Mother...”

I’d already known that nobles used their hidden rooms to express their hidden emotions, but this was my first time actually seeing it. Elvira, whom I’d always known for her calm smiles and plotting from the shadows, was now scrunching up her face and sobbing.

“I am worried about those who went to Ahrensbach, but I also fear that your small shoulders will need to bear the entire future of our country...” she said. Hearing her voice her feelings so openly—and seeing the tears pouring down her face—hit me straight in the chest.

The royal family was focused on whether they would be able to obtain the Grutrissheit, and what they would do if they did. The archducal family was focused on how to lead Ehrenfest after my departure. How many among them were worried about what might happen to me if the Grutrissheit ended up in my hands?

Once again, the most I could manage was a quiet “Mother...” I’d always been taught that nobles were never soft on one another, so I’d thought it pointless to even try. But now, for the first time, I extended a hand to Elvira just like I’d done with Mom so long ago. She clasped it, then squeezed it tight.

There really was someone else who shared my sadness.

“Rozemyne, the weight you are about to carry is not one I can carry with you... but I will do whatever it takes to ensure that you can leave Ehrenfest behind without any concerns or regrets. Stay true to yourself, and continue to forge your own way. When you obtain the Grutrissheit, use it not as a bludgeon of power but as a tool to secure your wishes. I know you can do it. You are my daughter, after all.”

Magic Tools for Children

Elvira and I spent ages together in the hidden room. I told her how Cornelius had spent his time at the Royal Academy, where she hadn't been able to keep an eye on him, and what Eckhart had used to do when visiting the temple, among other things. In return, she told me about Siegrecht and Aurelia, and how hard Brunhilde was working.

Our conversation went on for such a long time that I ended up exhausted. I slept better than ever that night. In fact, I overslept. When the estate attendants informed me that it was almost third bell, I wanted to cry out and ask why they hadn't roused me sooner.

As it turned out, Elvira had instructed them to let me sleep, since she had kept me up later than usual. Still, it was unbelievably embarrassing to have overslept after my guard knights came to get me.

"G-Good morning..." I said as I entered the dining hall.

"You took your time," Cornelius replied, teasing me for oversleeping. "Everyone else is already here."

I apologized to the guard knights, then worked my way through my fairly late breakfast.

"It is good to know you slept well," Elvira said, casually sipping her tea as I ate. "Do you have a moment to talk before you return to the castle?"

We launched into a discussion about the printing industry's handover. Muriella was standing behind Elvira and doing what appeared to be some very scholarly work. I could guess from how bright and enthusiastic she looked that things were going well between them.

"If we can manage commoner meetings without you, then I do not expect us to encounter any problems worth worrying about," Elvira said. "Which reminds me, Rozemyne... You said that you plan to leave your temple attendants with Lord Melchior, but what of your artist?"

"I will summon Wilma to the Sovereignty when we start

printing there,” I declared. “Don’t expect me to hand her over, Mother. She is mine.”

“My, what a shame...” Elvira sighed, not sounding disappointed at all. Then she chuckled. “Do you not worry that someone might buy her after you leave the temple? She will have even less of a place in the Sovereignty than your laynobles, so perhaps you could purchase her now, then entrust her to somebody here. That should put your mind at ease until you come of age, should it not?”

“And it would also give *you* plenty of time to request her services,” I said, having seen right through her.

Elvira chuckled again. She clearly took great interest in Wilma’s artistic talent.

I mean, she’s right—that would put my mind at ease—but I’ll need to see how Wilma feels about it.

“Wilma has been looking after the orphanage,” I explained, “so we will need to find someone to take her place. And she will need to agree, of course.”

“You are mistaken, Rozemyne. Once you leave, I *will* obtain her. And as a gray shrine maiden not in the service of a noble, she will have no choice in the matter. Keep that in mind as you make plans for your attendants.”

I was immediately reminded of the way that other gray shrine maidens had been treated upon losing their noble masters. I’d assumed that the temple would continue to operate as I pleased as long as I gave instructions before leaving for the Sovereignty... but that had apparently been naive of me.

“Very well,” I said. “I will consider this carefully.”

“That would be wise. Subsequently... I informed Damuel of our conversation last night.”

I turned to look at Damuel, who remained stone-faced as he stood guard. “I will respect your wishes,” I said to him, “so please tell me when you make a decision.”

“Yes, my lady.”

As our conversation continued, an ordonnanz from Sylvester arrived. Twelve magic tools for children had arrived from the royal family.

“Not only is this sudden, but they have sent fewer than we agreed upon,” I noted. “Why would they do this and risk our agreement falling through...?”

“I do not think they intend to sabotage your adoption; rather,

they have sent you a portion of your payment now to reinforce its legitimacy. Considering how desperately we need new nobles, and the problems that waiting another year would cause for us, I cannot see Ehrenfest being able to refuse these tools. It would be best if you returned to the castle at once. Come back when you have the time, though; then we may speak again.”

“Yes, Mother.”

Immediately upon my return to the castle, I was summoned to an archducal family meeting to discuss what we should do with the newly received magic tools. We decided to accept them—in large part because we needed to increase Ehrenfest’s noble population as quickly as we could, but also because we had nothing to gain from refusing them. For the royal family to have sent us an advance payment in the first place, they must have been determined to secure my adoption—and sending back the tools wouldn’t change that fact. Refusing would only delay our plans by an entire year, and it would mean more children who couldn’t be baptized.

“Given how many we received, could we not send some to the orphanage?” I asked Sylvester.

“Unless they can obtain mednoble levels of mana by their baptisms, it would only be a waste of potions. And then there’s the enormous amount of strain it would put on their bodies. Rather than using the magic tools now and ending up with a bunch of extra laynobles, we’re better off saving them for any mana-rich children who might be born in the future.”

I wasn’t surprised; I’d expected an outright refusal. But then he raised an eyebrow at me and continued.

“So if we *do* send the tools to the orphanage, they’ll need to be given to orphans who have adequate mana and won’t cause trouble. I’d advise getting Hartmut to interview them. I won’t be able to trust *your* evaluations, since you have such a soft spot for those kids.”

Being told that I couldn’t be trusted was kind of annoying—but at the same time, I couldn’t protest. More people than I could remember had told me I was too soft on those I cared about. So, it was decided that Hartmut would be responsible for the final interviews, wherein he would check whether the orphans were *ideologically aligned*, so to speak.

“Isn’t that nice, Rozemyne?” Melchior asked with a smile. “The

magic tools won't just go to people from our faction. I'm glad to have more friends in the temple."

I nodded. Then, after borrowing a mana-measuring tool from Sylvester, I went to the temple with Melchior and his retainers.

"Welcome back, Lady Rozemyne."

"Thank you, everyone."

After my attendants greeted me, I went to the High Bishop's chambers and changed into my robes. Then it was time to listen to everyone's reports. The blue apprentices and orphans were spending their days without incident, and, thanks to Kampfner and Frietack, the preparations for the spring coming-of-age ceremony were now complete.

"I am relieved to hear that there have been no problems," I said. "As for me... I have a grave announcement to make."

As my attendants all stood up straight, I explained that I would be leaving Ehrenfest in a year's time, and that Melchior would be taking my place as High Bishop. I didn't include unnecessary details, like where I was going or the fact that I was being adopted by the king. Gray priests and shrine maidens were obligated to answer any questions put to them by nobles, so it was best to give them as little information as possible.

I continued, "It is my hope that you will all serve Melchior in his new position and strive to maintain the temple's current state to the best of your ability."

"We were already working under the assumption that you would resign from your post upon coming of age. This will simply require us to accelerate our schedule," Fran said, then gave a sad smile. "In any case, I am used to those I serve leaving me behind."

My heart ached. "I would have liked to move you all into my library, but you told me before that you feel uncomfortable in the Noble's Quarter, did you not? I do not know who will manage my library once I am gone, and since I will not be heading to another temple, there will not be anywhere for you to stay."

In an ideal world, I would obtain the Grutrisseheit, dissect Ahrensbach, and then return Ferdinand to Ehrenfest, whereupon he would take all of my temple attendants into his care. But with the future being so uncertain, it was safest to leave them with Melchior.

"Indeed," Fran said, "I only know how to live in the temple. No matter where you are headed, it would not suit me. I am content

with the idea of serving Lord Melchior; based on his words and actions up until this point, I do not expect to encounter any issues.”

“Were I moving to another temple, I would certainly have brought you all with me,” I assured everyone.

Fran let out a quiet chuckle. “And after visiting Hasse’s monastery, I would certainly have accompanied you.”

“There is one exception, however: Wilma will need to make a choice.”

“A choice...?” Wilma repeated, looking overcome with concern. Although she had come a long way in conquering her fear of men, it had yet to disappear completely.

“Over the next year, you will need to decide whether to become my mother’s or my personal artist,” I said, then conveyed the details of my discussion with Elvira.

“But... what will happen to the orphanage?” It said a lot that her first question was about the children.

“To preserve its present condition, I intend to negotiate for either Monika or Lily to become Melchior’s attendant and take over as its manager.” After all, they were the ones who knew Wilma’s philosophy best.

Upon hearing my explanation, Wilma thanked me for my consideration and smiled—though it wasn’t a sincere smile of relief. A quick glance around the room revealed that Monika and Fritz were looking equally as uneasy. But when I met Fritz’s eye, his expression suddenly became peaceful.

“Lady Rozemyne, there is no need to be concerned about us,” he said. “We can sense from your demeanor that this move has come suddenly for you as well, and that you do not want to go. We also understand that you show us far more compassion than anyone else would.”

Zahm nodded. “We do not expect the orphanage to be treated poorly under Lord Melchior. However, with how quickly these positions of authority change hands, we do not know how long he will remain the High Bishop. Our concern is a less considerate figure coming into power, and who knows how long they might remain?”

It was impossible to say when a noble like the previous High Bishop would take control of the temple. Just as I’d wiped away Bezewanst’s influence in the blink of an eye, it wouldn’t take too long for someone new to wipe away mine.

“Melchior is a boy,” I said, “so he’s unlikely to be taken out of Ehrenfest. Still, I will devote myself to this handover so that you can all rest easy.”

“We thank you.”

Next up were the magic tools for the orphanage. It was agreed that Wilma would inform the children born to nobles that they had a chance to receive one if their mana quantity was high enough and they were able to pass an interview.

“One must fill the tools with a certain amount of mana in order to become a noble,” I said. “If we do not give them to the children posthaste, they may fail to meet this requirement. How soon can we hold the interviews?”

“The children are currently visiting the forest, but any time from tomorrow onward will do,” Wilma replied. “We can ensure they are ready as long as we have a date.”

I said that I would decide on one with Hartmut, then dispersed my attendants. They all went off to carry out their respective jobs.

“Fran,” I said, “I wish to speak to Benno of the Plantin Company regarding my move. Meeting with him in the orphanage director’s chambers would be ideal.”

“Understood. I will contact them and schedule a meeting.”

“Zahm, go to the High Priest’s chambers and arrange a date to interview the children.”

“As you will.”

“Fritz, I will need a tremendous amount of paper this year. Gather as many taues as you can.”

“Very well.”

As I gave one instruction after another, I inspected various letters and documents that Monika had brought over. Things soon settled down, at which point Philine approached me.

“Lady Rozemyne,” she whispered, “what about the rejuvenation potions for the orphans who will receive the magic tools?”

“I intend to prepare them myself. Oh, actually... Someone told me it was problematic that I only ever entrust my apprentice scholars with paperwork, so perhaps I should leave the brewing to you and Roderick.”

For obvious reasons, I couldn’t assume that Sylvester would conveniently magic up a stash of rejuvenation potions for the children. As the orphanage director, I would need to bear this burden myself.

"I cannot prepare rejuvenation potions for Konrad on my own," Philine said, "so I'd given up on him becoming a noble whether we retrieved his magic tool or not. However... if we are giving rejuvenation potions to the children of the orphanage, I would ask that we give some to Konrad as well. Please, Lady Rozemyne." She wanted nothing more than to give her brother a chance to live as a noble.

I turned to face her. "My understanding is that this process will put great strain on the body of any laynoble who attempts it... but if that is what Konrad wants, I shall allow it."

"Truly? I thank you ever so much." A broad smile spread across Philine's face; she wouldn't have been able to gather the necessary ingredients and brew enough rejuvenation potions to make Konrad into a noble on her own. Still, as adorable as she was, she was letting her love for her brother distract her from reality.

"Philine... did you not say that you would give your name to me and purchase Konrad so that you could accompany me to the Sovereignty? What will happen after Konrad is made into a noble? I could not bring a minor with me unless he, too, offered up his name."

"Wha...? Oh."

"It costs a fortune to raise a child as a noble. Will you be able to fund his upbringing and pay for him to attend the Royal Academy while you are still a student yourself?"

Philine fell silent and gazed down at her hands. The salary of an apprentice layscholar who had run away from home with nothing would scarcely make a dent in the cost of educating two people at once. She had been building up her savings by doing translation work and selling information, but it was hard to live as a noble without the established wealth of one's forebears. She wouldn't even be able to afford an outfit for her coming-of-age ceremony unless she started putting money aside now.

"If you intend to make Konrad a noble, then I would suggest returning home with him."

"Lady Rozemyne?!"

"Your father married into your family, did he not? And you are the house's true successor. Mother told me everything."

By returning home and taking her estate back from her father and stepmother, Philine would acquire the magic tools and learning materials her forebears had left behind, as well as outfits that could

be altered to fit her. She wouldn't have an extravagant life by any means, but it would be better than renting a room in the castle while struggling to support two people alone.

"Now that Konrad has entered the orphanage, I certainly am the true successor of my house," Philine said. "However, I will need to wait until my coming of age before I can take over. Returning now would once again put me at the mercy of my father and Lady Jonsara—and in any case, I am unsure how many of my mother's belongings are even still in our possession." As it turned out, her father and stepmother had sold plenty in order to support themselves.

"Konrad could be baptized in the orphanage and live in the temple as an apprentice blue priest," I suggested, "but that would make him an orphaned noble under the aub's care. If you wish for him to be your younger brother, then you must see him returned to noble society before his baptism. You should start thinking of a way to resolve your issue, whether that be by staying at home and asking Mother to support you, or by marrying an adult man and getting him to protect you from your parents."

As I'd said, baptizing Konrad in the orphanage would sever the sibling ties between him and Philine, who was now looking truly miserable. It was sad to see, but it wasn't my fault that baptisms determined one's parents, or that the aub became the guardian of children baptized in the orphanage. I wasn't in any position to change these facts either.

"Before we can proceed," I said, "you will need to have a very serious conversation with Konrad. Will he really want to drink rejuvenation potions nonstop and endure so much suffering for the sake of being baptized as a noble? And if so, would he rather be baptized in the temple or return home?"

Philine already had the magic tool that was her mother's heirloom; and since we were distributing rejuvenation potions to the orphanage, I didn't mind giving some to Konrad as well. I couldn't take his future into my hands, though. I wasn't his guardian—and in just a year, I wouldn't be the orphanage director either.

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed that Damuel was frowning. He had been listening to our entire conversation.

"So, the orphanage meeting is being held today... then I've got

my meeting with the Plantin Company tomorrow..." I said to remind myself.

Hartmut nodded; he was carrying the mana-measuring tool as we both made our way to the orphanage. "And it won't be long before the spring coming-of-age ceremony or the summer baptisms. Once those have concluded, the aub will need to go to Ahrensbach, so time really is of the essence."

Philine was also accompanying us. She was holding her mother's heirloom, which she planned to give to Konrad if he decided that he wanted to become a noble with everyone else.

Fran and Zahm, who were at the head of our group, opened the door to the orphanage for us. Inside were five kneeling children between the ages of three and six, all of whom had yet to be baptized. Dirk and Konrad were among them.

I could only assume that Wilma or Hartmut had already explained the situation to the kids, as they all tensed up when they saw the magic tool we had brought with us.

"The mana measuring will now begin," Hartmut announced, then went straight to the oldest of the children. "State your name and age."

One's mana capacity naturally increased as one grew older, so we had unique requirements for each age. Hartmut checked whether the gathered children had met Sylvester's criteria, then divided them into two groups. Dirk and another boy were on the left, while Konrad and two boys were on the right.

"The two of you on the left have met the aub's mana requirements," Hartmut declared. "If you wish, he will provide you with magic tools."

The boy next to Dirk was an especially tiny three-year-old who needed Wilma's support just to stand. It was unlikely that he even understood what was being said to him, so Hartmut gave up on questioning his intentions and instead turned to Wilma.

"Wilma, that boy has the mana quantity of a mednoble, and there is still adequate time before his baptism. It would be best to give him a magic tool; he is still too young to come to a decision on his own, so we should keep his options open."

Of course, Hartmut was more concerned about securing the duchy more nobles than about giving the boy more prospects. He then focused on Dirk, who was standing stiffly in place.

"Now then, Dirk—your mana quantity surpasses the aub's

criteria. Do you wish to receive a magic tool?"

"Wait!" one of the boys on the right shouted. "Dirk isn't the son of a noble. He's just an orphan. It isn't right for him to be given a magic tool!"

Dirk said nothing in response; he merely grimaced and cast his eyes down.

Hartmut blinked at the boy a few times, then cocked his head in a deliberate show of confusion. "What are you saying? All of you are orphans. Dirk is one, as are you."

"You're wrong. My parents are nobles, so—"

"A child who has not been baptized as a noble has no right to act like one," Hartmut said, easily undermining the boy's protest. "Here, you are an orphan like anyone else. You should know that a noble's worth is their mana, and with that in mind, Dirk is more valuable than you." He then returned his attention to Dirk. "Allow me to ask again: Do you wish to receive a magic tool?"

The tenderness with which Hartmut had previously looked upon the orphans was gone. Now, as he tried to determine whether Dirk wished to be a noble, he wore the scrutinizing expression of an interviewer.

Dirk's eyes wandered the room before finally coming to rest on a single person: Delia. She was at the back of the dining hall, chewing on her lip and clasping her hands together, awaiting his answer with bated breath. She looked as pale as when the previous High Bishop had stolen Dirk, and her silent pleas resounded throughout my mind.

"Please don't ask for a magic tool. Please don't leave my side. I don't want to lose my brother."

Dirk looked away from Delia and back at Hartmut. Then, after taking a slow breath...

"I do."

"No!" Delia shrieked, her eyes wide with terror. Everyone turned to look at her... except Dirk. He alone continued to face Hartmut, meeting his gaze head-on.

"Lord Hartmut, I wish to receive a magic tool."

"For what purpose?" Hartmut asked quietly. "Because you are starting so late, dyeing a feystone will prove to be a long and arduous process. There is also your beloved elder sister, who does not wish for you to become a noble. Why do you seek this path nonetheless? What do you intend to do upon joining the nobility?"

Dirk balled his hands into tight fists, then declared, "I want to become a noble. Then I want to become the High Bishop, High Priest, or orphanage director."

"Oh?" Hartmut replied. He'd raised an eyebrow in slight amusement, but his eyes were as sharp as ever.

"The orphanage was an awful place before Lady Rozemyne came along. She's the reason we have food to eat and don't freeze in the winter."

"A very wise—and very true—observation," Hartmut remarked with a few brisk nods, sounding a lot like a teacher praising a good student.

"Not only that, but Lady Rozemyne was the only noble willing to help us when the gray priests were in danger. And she can only serve as the High Bishop while underage because of the High Priest supporting her."

Hartmut was thoroughly satisfied with that answer. I couldn't protest, since Dirk was speaking in my favor, but I couldn't help but think that his speech was a teeny bit... off. Had he fallen victim to Hartmut's brainwashing?

"Last spring," Dirk continued, "the gray priests and shrine maidens were very concerned about the new High Priest. They didn't know how the temple or the orphanage were going to change."

I'd managed to make so many sweeping changes as the orphanage director because Ferdinand, the High Priest at the time, had given me his permission. The fact that I'd needed to consult him about every little thing in the first place showed which of the two roles held the most authority. Everyone had worried that the new High Priest might oppose my suggestions or even return the orphanage to its old ways. The adult gray priests who could remember those bleak times were the most concerned of all.

"But then, Lady Rozemyne chose *you* to perform the role, Lord Hartmut. Everyone rejoiced, for you were a kind man who carried out her will to the letter in all things. I must admit, though—at the time, I was ignorant of what things were like before Lady Rozemyne, so I struggled to understand why the adults were so overjoyed."

Dirk was launching into what sounded more and more like a planned speech. He hadn't left the orphanage before his baptism, and my retainers were more or less the only outsiders who visited,

so he'd never had the misfortune of meeting any cruel nobles. He hadn't been able to empathize with the adults' concerns or their subsequent relief as a result.

This had also been true when Konrad arrived at the orphanage; while the adults had worried about the appearance of a noble child, Dirk had simply been glad to have another kid who was his age around.

"Konrad was the same as the rest of us," Dirk continued. "Before he arrived, I was the only one who used the black stones that Fran brought us. But then I wasn't alone anymore."

As someone with noble origins, Konrad needed to use black feystones to keep his mana from overflowing. This had come as a pleasant surprise to Dirk, who similarly had to use black feystones to deal with his Devouring. He'd quickly made a new friend, and it hadn't even crossed his mind that they had such different backgrounds.

"But the noble children who came in the winter were nothing like Konrad. They were arrogant, and they didn't listen to what the adults said. They would demand to know why they had to do things, all the while declaring that living here was just a temporary embarrassment before they returned to noble society."

The noble children had made it painfully clear that they looked down on the adults and orphans, despite having become orphans themselves. That had been the first time that Dirk—someone who had grown up in an environment that valued equality—had experienced the harshness of status discrimination.

"Konrad asked me what we would do if a similar noble became the orphanage director or the High Priest," Dirk explained, "and that was when I finally understood."

For an entire season, the nobles left in the orphanage had refused to change, and that had made Dirk realize something—few noble-born children would ever embrace the perspective of the orphans.

"Wilma told us that you and Lady Rozemyne are leaving the temple next year. She also mentioned that she's going to be purchased, and that Lord Melchior is becoming the High Bishop."

Indeed, so many important roles were about to change hands: the High Bishop, High Priest, orphanage director, and orphanage manager. This news had naturally thrown the orphanage into a panic. Even the adults known for their composure had grown

frantic, which had made Dirk absolutely terrified.

"I thought about what I could do to help out, but nothing came to mind. The best outcome would be for a good noble who cared about the orphanage to be put in charge, but there aren't many of those to begin with, right? I don't want things to go back to how they were..." He turned to his sister. "Especially because Delia can't leave the orphanage."

Delia's love for her brother was so strong that she had once committed a crime for him. By all rights, she should have been executed alongside the previous High Bishop, but my intervention had convinced the aub to simply confine her to the orphanage instead. Her life would change dramatically if something happened to the way things were being managed.

"For her to live in peace, both the High Bishop and the High Priest need to be good nobles," Dirk concluded.

"There is no requirement for the High Bishop or the High Priest to be nobles," Hartmut noted in a quiet voice. "Both positions used to be given to blue priests. There is no need for you to become a noble."

Dirk shook his head. "That was how it used to be, but our current High Bishop is a member of the archducal family, and nobles now visit the temple on a regular basis. Things have changed. Only nobles can fight back against nobles. Am I wrong?"

"No, not at all. A blue priest would stand no chance of resisting the will of a noble unless they were a noble themselves."

The former attendants who had returned to the orphanage after the purge had made it clear that there existed an impassable barrier between the blue priests and noble society. And now that there were noble children living in the temple as apprentice blue priests, moved there for their parents' crimes, a common blue priest would have no means of defense.

"I want to protect the methods that Lady Rozemyne taught us, and protect the orphanage so that Delia and everyone else can live happily. That's why I need to become a noble, then the High Bishop or High Priest."

It wasn't enough to simply *want* to become a noble; Dirk understood this, and it was why he had given up on ever going down that path. But now... he had a chance. If he could pass the tests and challenges before him, he would actually be baptized as a noble.

"I... can't miss this opportunity..." Dirk said.

Hartmut nodded. "Indeed, never again can we expect so many noble children to enter the orphanage, or the aub to provide them with magic tools to return to noble society."

We had only arrived at our current situation through a string of unlikely events: the purge, our resolve to save the noble-born children, our decision to replenish our damaged noble population as quickly as possible, and the royal family's agreement to send us magic tools. Most important of all, this had all occurred now, before Dirk's baptism. In many ways, this really was his only chance.

"However," Hartmut continued, "it seems that your sister whom you care so much about is opposed to you becoming a noble." He gestured to Delia, who was weeping and shaking her head in protest.

Dirk looked very troubled.

"Please, Dirk!" Delia wailed. "Reconsider! If you get baptized as a noble, I won't be able to see you anymore. I won't be able to call you family! For the rest of our lives, status will require me to treat you only as my superior. I don't care how bad things get here. I'll survive, so please don't leave me!"

Each word that Delia cried out broke my heart a little more. It was like watching myself sob about not wanting to be taken away from my loved ones. I was well aware how agonizing it was to be not just separated from one's family but also forbidden from even calling them family in the first place.

Dirk... don't do this. Stay by her side. She really loves and cares about you. Having emotional support is more important than you know!

In my heart, I was crying out to him as well. I couldn't actually voice my feelings, though; everyone would assume I was *ordering* him to stay. On top of that, while it was easy to forget, Hartmut was in the midst of carrying out his interviews. I'd said time and time again that I would respect the children's choices, so I couldn't just interject.

After obtaining Hartmut's permission, Dirk went over to Delia and tenderly stroked her crimson hair. She clung to him all the while, begging him not to go.

"Delia," Dirk said, "you're the one who taught me what Lady Rozemyne gave us and what she did to change the orphanage, aren't you? You told me how she protected us from high-ranking nobles and the nobles of other places."

I'd always been on guard against Delia when she served as my attendant, since she'd quite openly spied on me for Bezewanst. We hadn't been close at all... but according to Dirk, she had only nice things to say about me.

There was a fire in Dirk's dark-brown, almost black eyes, as though I were his personal hero. "Lord Hartmut always says the same things as you when he visits the orphanage," he said. "He tells us how amazing Lady Rozemyne is, and how hard she's working for our sakes."

Excuse me?! Hartmut?! What have you been doing in the orphanage?!

I swiveled my head to look at him. He was nodding along with an extremely satisfied smile.

"Lord Hartmut said that Lady Rozemyne became the archduke's adopted daughter to protect the people she cared about. I want to be like her. I want to become a noble so that I can protect everyone I care about here in the orphanage. Please, Delia. I need you to understand."

Delia broke down in tears. She didn't want to be separated from her brother, but she also couldn't hold him back any longer. She was caught between two worlds, and as she desperately tried to figure out what to do, her hold on Dirk loosened.

Dirk slipped out of his sister's arms and returned to Hartmut, not looking back even as Delia reached out to him. "I don't want the changes Lady Rozemyne made for the orphanage to be undone," he said, his eyes unwavering. "Please, Lord Hartmut, make me into a noble."

Hartmut gazed straight back at him. "Trying to increase your mana with rejuvenation potions is going to be painful enough, but if you choose to be baptized in the orphanage, even in the future, most people will assume you are the child of criminals. Noble society will not look upon or treat you kindly."

Dirk would be baptized alongside the children of the former Veronica faction, and Sylvester would become their guardian. The nobles would see them all as the children of criminals, and the others baptized with him would almost certainly mock him for being a commoner.

"Above all else," Hartmut continued, "Lady Rozemyne won't be here to protect you. Half-hearted resolve won't be enough for you to become a noble."

“As an orphan, I would not have stated my wish without being completely sure.”

Orange and dark-brown eyes clashed. Then, after a pause, Hartmut’s expression softened into a smile. “Very well. I will consult the aub and obtain a magic tool for you.”

Dirk finally relaxed. He crossed his arms and knelt, then went back to his sister. “Er, Delia...”

She looked up and glared at him in complete silence, her blue eyes full of tears. Dirk had been so confident before, but her unfaltering stare made him waver.

“Are you mad...?”

“I won’t respond,” she said. “Not to ‘Delia.’ Call me ‘Sister!’”

“Whaaat?!”

Delia pouted and turned away out of spite, her raised chin the picture of prickliness. “From now until you become a noble, I won’t respond to you unless you call me ‘Sister.’ This is your punishment for making such an important choice without consulting me—your family—first. Geez! You always mimic Lady Rozemyne’s worst traits!”

“They’re her *coolest* traits!”

“You did something major on a whim, without even warning anyone! That’s *definitely* one of her worst ones. Geez! Lady Rozemyne has always been like this!”

Wait, what?! You think this is my fault?!

I knew that Delia was only trying to hide her embarrassment, but I couldn’t help feeling exposed. My guard knights were chuckling to themselves as she listed all the things I’d done in the past, while Dirk retorted that my actions had ultimately been for the best. It was a classic argument between siblings.

“I see you have *always* made important decisions on a whim, Lady Rozemyne.”

“You haven’t grown since before your baptism.”

“Oh no, she has,” Hartmut said, not even attempting to mask his pride. “Her influence has spread immeasurably and now engulfs the entire country. What is that if not growth?”

That isn’t helpful in the slightest!

While everyone was using the siblings’ argument as fodder to embarrass me, Philine quietly spoke up. “Lady Rozemyne, may I speak with Konrad?”

I said that she could.

Philine walked over to her brother, their mother's heirloom in hand. "Konrad, do you have a moment?"

"Yes, Sister."

Philine nodded, then held out the heirloom. "This is the magic tool that Mother left for you. Lady Rozemyne has agreed to give you the rejuvenation potions I could not prepare on my own. You can be a noble again. Will you be baptized as my little brother?"

He tilted his head at her. "Even if we have rejuvenation potions, how can I be a noble without money? Wilma told us that the children who receive the archduke's magic tools will get to have him as their guardian, but that won't include me, will it?"

The children baptized with the archduke as their guardian wouldn't need to worry about funding their own educations—any money or learning resources they required would be seized from the purged nobles. Konrad wouldn't receive this privilege, though; he hadn't met the archduke's mana requirements.

Konrad continued, "You always said it would be really expensive to gather the materials needed to attend the Royal Academy. I don't think we'd be able to prepare everything. It would cost so much that we'd need to sell the hundreds of sheets of paper we make." Even he understood that, as a minor, Philine would struggle to support him while also supporting herself.

"Konrad, if you choose to become a noble again, we will return home. There's a chance that Mother's belongings are still there. We could use them to support you at the Royal Academy."

Philine had already bought her own learning materials; if she could find some more at home, then Konrad would be able to attend the Academy with her. It would even be possible to use her status as my retainer to wring money from her father.

"Sister, Father doesn't care about me, and it was because Lady Jonsara took my tool away that I wasn't able to become a noble in the first place. I don't want to go back there."

"You know... this is your last chance to become a noble. The orphanage won't be given any more magic tools, nor will you have Lady Rozemyne here to provide you with rejuvenation potions. Plus, life as a noble is so much different from life as a gray priest, right?"

Konrad shook his head. "Save that magic tool for your own child."

Philine furrowed her brow, squeezed her eyes shut, then let out

a melancholy sigh. "If you choose not to become a noble, there won't be a future in which we can live as siblings. For us to spend time together, I'd need to purchase you."

"Purchase me? But I won't be of any use to you."

"I would do it as an indulgence, simply so that I could spend time with my little brother," Philine said. Then, with a smile, she held up four fingers. "There are four paths ahead of me. The first is to leave you in the orphanage and give my name to Lady Rozemyne so that I can go with her. The second is to stay in Ehrenfest until my coming of age, then leave you in the orphanage to serve Lady Rozemyne. The third is to return home and support you in becoming a noble. And the last one, if you decide not to become a noble, is to stay here in Ehrenfest to be with you. Before I can choose one, I must know your plans for the future."

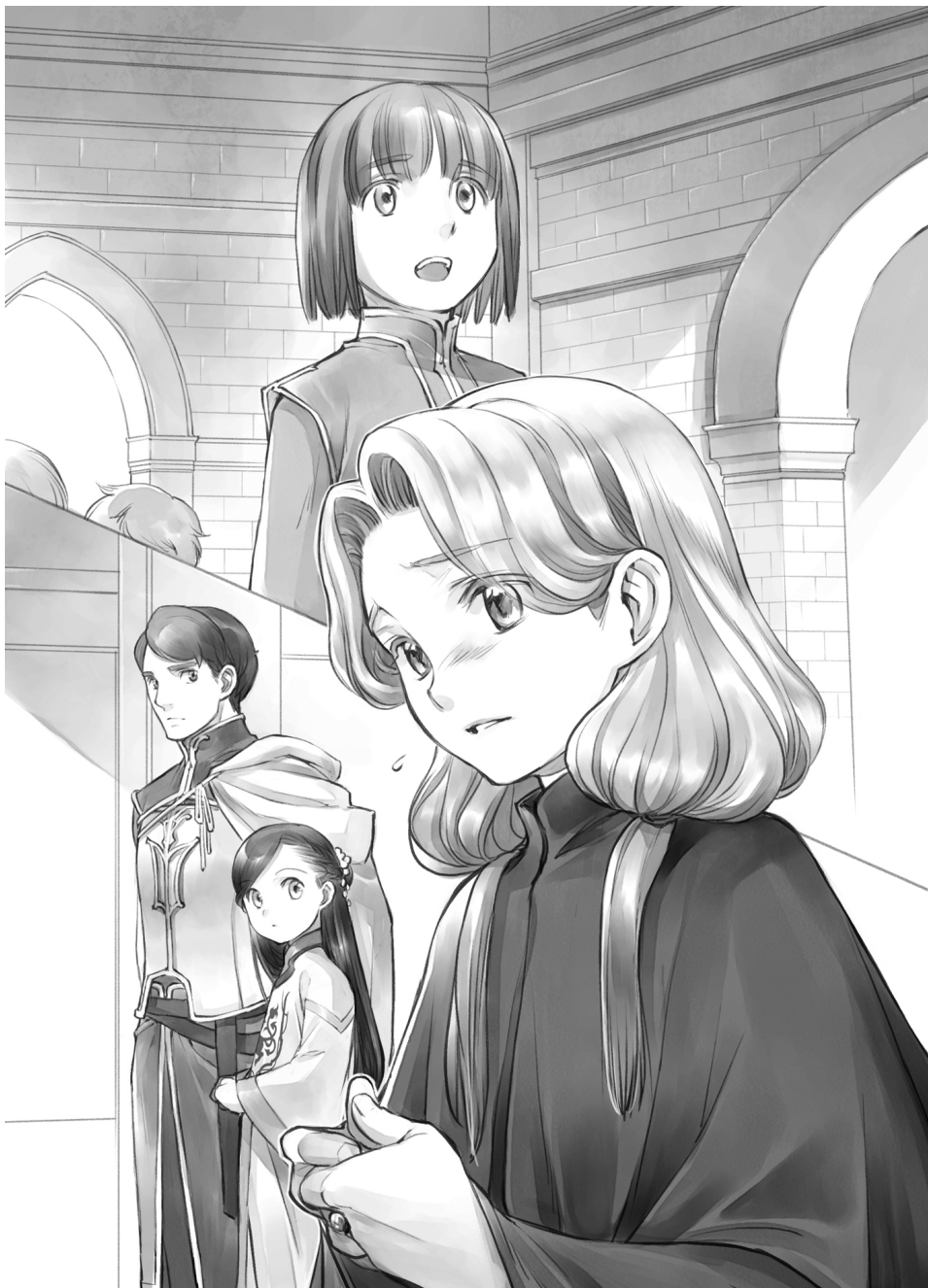
"I..." Konrad trailed off, his mouth flapping open and shut as he struggled to decide whether he should voice his true feelings.

Philine gave him a troubled smile. "If you don't tell me, I'll just follow my own selfish desires."

"I want to dedicate my life to the orphanage. I don't want to live with you; I want to stay here with all the people who were there for me when I was hurting most."

"I see..." Philine whispered, slumping her shoulders. "Thank you for telling me. And what will you do in the orphanage?"

"I want to become a blue priest like Brother Frietack."



As it turned out, Konrad already had a goal to work toward. He wanted to be like a certain blue priest—someone who could earn money on his own and support himself, who had the trust of the High Bishop *and* the High Priest, and who looked after the temple in their absence. He was valued so highly that they had even fought to retrieve him when he was taken away during the purge.

Konrad sees Frietack as his role model...? I never would have guessed.

He continued, “Lutz from the Plantin Company said that they need more blue priests who know how the workshop functions. That’s what I want to become. Also, I made a promise with Dirk. If he can become a noble, I’ll work to become a blue priest who can support us both. Then we can protect the orphanage together.” There was a distinct sparkle in his eyes, which were so much like his sister’s. “If you don’t mind me voicing *my* selfish desires, I want you to stay in Ehrenfest until you come of age. I want you to help me become a blue priest after my baptism.”

It wouldn’t be as expensive as becoming a noble, but becoming an apprentice blue priest would cost money too. Konrad was a laynoble—and one without much mana, at that—so he wouldn’t be able to supply much after his baptism. The duchy offered subsidies based on how much mana the children provided, so he would need help until the time came when he could earn enough to support himself.

“My mana quantity is so low that even my own father abandoned me,” Konrad said. “I think that becoming a blue priest and supporting Dirk and Lord Melchior would be so much more meaningful than trying to become a noble again.” He had set his sights on a life in the temple that wouldn’t involve becoming a noble. He wanted to be a blue priest and support himself, not live as one of the grays who could easily be bought and taken away.

“Very well,” Philine replied with a bright smile. “I will stay here in Ehrenfest until my coming of age, to look after you and assist you in protecting the orphanage.” It was a relief to see that they had each chosen a path that would make them happy.

Now I just needed to help Philine as her lady. This would include laying the groundwork for Elvira to support her, and requesting the assistance of the archducal family as the highest

authorities in Ehrenfest to ensure that the nobles visiting the temple wouldn't cause any damage.

Where should I start...?

My mood brightened as I watched the two siblings. Konrad was glad to have both communicated his wish and received his sister's approval. He seemed a lot more open with her than before.

"Sister, you said that nobles are attending meetings with merchants now, right? I want to know what they discuss, and the many ways that Lady Rozemyne has participated."

"Very well, but... do you wish to attend such meetings yourself?"

It was hardly the job of a blue priest to meet with merchants, but Konrad looked so excited that I couldn't bring myself to say anything. Not to mention, if he *did* end up becoming a blue priest who frequented the workshop, there was a genuine chance that the Plantin Company might ask him to attend so that they could consult him on various matters.

"The Plantin Company merchants who visit the workshop have been teaching me about business, bit by bit," Konrad explained. Then, with his fists clenched, he declared, "I want to be a cutthroat negotiator with the soul of a merchant, just like Lady Rozemyne!"

Uh, Konrad...? Isn't that a pretty messed-up goal to have?

"A blue priest capable of negotiating on Lady Rozemyne's level..." Philine glanced over at me, then giggled. "You are going to have a long and very difficult road ahead of you, Konrad."

"You certainly were composed when you faced your brother," I remarked to Philine. In contrast to how confused and distraught she had seemed when consulting me, she had come across as calm and collected during her earlier discussion with Konrad. She had doubtless been fighting against a storm of emotions raging in her heart, but she hadn't let that show.

A blush reddened Philine's cheeks as she replied, "Damuel scolded me."

"Oh?"

"I was already having such a hard time figuring out what I wanted to do next year, so when this chance arose for Konrad to become a noble again, I... leapt forward without thinking things through. Before, Rihyarda and the others would work through these things with me, but she and Brunhilde are gone now, and my

situation with my brother isn't something to be discussed with those at the castle."

Most nobles would simply declare that Konrad wasn't her brother anymore now that he had moved to the orphanage, and that there was no need for her to give him any more thought. That kind of attitude wouldn't have led to a fruitful discussion.

"I thought you were the only one I could rely on," Philine continued, "but Damuel scolded me for that. He said that your responsibility for Konrad ended the moment he entered the orphanage, and that I should not trouble you with this matter."

Everyone had scolded me for "getting too involved with Philine" after I went to her house to rescue Konrad. With that in mind, Damuel had explained that it was unreasonable to expect even more of me.

"You are busy enough preparing for your move; whether I would choose to make Konrad a noble or bring him with me to the Sovereignty was for me to figure out. I am well aware that, as my lady, you will always be considerate of my choices and my future, and think things over for me if consulted... but I must not be so quick to depend on you. You are not Konrad's guardian as you are mine, and I should not request even more help with an orphan."

Damuel had walked Philine through her options and the support she could hope to receive. But first and foremost, he had said, she should ask Konrad what *he* wanted to do.

Holy cow! What?! Since when did Damuel get so cool?!

"He told me that if my heart was set on making Konrad a noble, he would propose to me and support me as my fiancé."

"What?! He proposed to you?!"

"It was more of an offer to help me than a formal proposal—a way of expanding my options." She smiled shyly and continued, "But I thought that relying on Damuel would be even more unacceptable than relying on you. He always helps me when I need it most, but the time has come for me to graduate from being a pitiable girl who must always be protected. If I am to walk beside him, I would rather do it with my head held high. Thus, I chose the path that will not force him to offer more assistance than is reasonable."

Damuel certainly hadn't featured in any of the paths that Philine had mentioned to Konrad. However...

Wouldn't that make Damuel assume she was rejecting him?

“Once I am an independent woman, I will propose using the method that Clarissa told me about,” Philine declared.

I glanced across the room at Damuel, who was facing away from us. *Should I warn him of what’s to come? I really hope you like knives, Damuel.*

Preparing Fey Paper

After breakfast and while I was practicing the harspiel, my retainers coming from the castle arrived. My guard knights switched places, and we started going over our plans for the day.

“This afternoon’s discussion with Benno is going to be confidential, so I intend to hold our meeting in my hidden room,” I said. “Damuel, if you would guard me.”

“And your scholar, Lady Rozemyne?” Hartmut asked with a smile.

I couldn’t help but hesitate. To protect my secrets, I would need to select a name-sworn retainer, but... was Hartmut really my only option? He was overflowing with enthusiasm, and everyone else was averting their eyes, so that appeared to be the case.

“Ngh... You may come, Hartmut.”

“As you will.”

Fran and Monika spent the morning ensuring that my hidden room was ready for use, while I made progress on the handover and other work in the High Priest’s chambers. Melchior and his retainers were there with me, so we discussed the future of the orphanage. Since one of my many duties was serving as the orphanage director, I said that Melchior should select one of his retainers to take over from me. He received this news with a truly troubled expression.

“The orphanage director... The High Priest is a reasonable enough role to fill, as its duties resemble scholar work, but the orphanage director has to look after commoner children, don’t they? That may be closer to attendant work, but it’s still so unique that I’m not sure one year would be enough time to complete the handover. Ah, and my retinue is still rather small... I think a girl would suit the position best.”

Melchior’s retainers were mostly men, as one would expect, and most considered managing an institution of orphans to be outside of their job description. Looking around, it seemed that they were also opposed to taking a female attendant for this purpose.

I understood that appearances were important, but this was

concerning. I'd intended to give Melchior one of my attendants, but it seemed unlikely that he would accept Monika or Nicola.

It won't be easy to change their mindsets either... What to do?

"Most residents of the orphanage have no mana," I said, "but now the children of the former Veronica faction are among its numbers. There is also the printing workshop to be considered, so unlike before, I think the archducal family should assume control."

The orphanage director would need to raise the children and deal with those who wanted to buy the grays deeply involved in the printing industry. Thus, the position would need to go to an archducal retainer or someone who could easily report to the aub.

"We could ask one of Charlotte's or Brunhilde's retainers..."

Melchior began, then shook his head. "Oh, but Charlotte is going to be busy until after Mother gives birth, and Brunhilde is still only engaged... Sister, are you leaving behind any attendants other than Brunhilde?"

I clapped my hands together and turned to Philine, who was working nearby. As both one of my retainers and someone who was used to paperwork, she was the perfect candidate.

"Philine, will you be the orphanage director?" I asked.

"Me?!"

"You wish to protect Konrad over the next three years until your coming of age, correct? The position will suit you well, then. You have seen my work up close, and you already have the necessary skills. Plus, as the director, you will receive an executive allowance—I assume you will want a stable source of income once I am gone."

Philine received a salary as an apprentice, but she had also been making money by working in the temple and selling me her transcriptions. In other words, my departure would massively impact her income. She was fortunate enough that Elvira was going to cover her room and board, but she would need more money to cover everything else.

"I would propose that you serve as the orphanage director for three years, during which you would train your replacement," I said. "I will speak to the aub and the others about this."

Philine had gone to the orphanage countless times, and she would be able to see Konrad there. I also trusted that she would treat the children well and pick her successor carefully.

"But I haven't prepared the chambers or anything like that..."

she murmured.

“All the furniture currently in the orphanage director’s chambers will remain there. I also intend to leave Nicola and Monika with you, as well as either Fran or Zahm. Of course, you would be doing this as a favor to me, so I will cover your costs for three years in return.” Under normal circumstances, I wouldn’t have reasonable cause to give extra funds to Philine and Philine alone—but assigning her to be the orphanage director made for the perfect excuse.

“Very well,” she said. “I accept this duty.”

“Having one of your retainers as the orphanage director sounds nice, Sister,” Melchior said. “Philine, if you could also help me when you come to the temple, I would very much appreciate that. I don’t think a year is going to be enough time to complete the handover.”

Philine smiled and nodded.

I smiled too. “Of course, Melchior, Philine’s help *will* come at a cost. I shall create a form detailing the tasks she will carry out and the compensation she should receive for her time. You will also want to compensate your own retainers, as you are asking them to do more than their expected workloads. I am paying mine already.”

As I puffed out my chest, satisfied, Melchior’s retainers stared expectantly at their lord.

After lunch, I went to the orphanage director’s chambers with my three retainers. It was Hartmut’s first time visiting this hidden room, so he was absolutely over the moon. Damuel was glancing between the two of us, having no doubt noticed the slight exhaustion I was feeling. Angelica was guarding the door, as always.

As I sipped the tea that Fran had poured me and ate one of the sweets that Nicola had prepared, Benno and Mark entered my chambers. We exchanged greetings, then went into my hidden room. It was a common enough occurrence... with one very uncommon exception.

Benno’s eyes moved cautiously to Hartmut; then he asked whether everything was okay. He wasn’t sure how openly he could speak, since Fran, Damuel, and Gil were the only ones in my service who normally entered this hidden room.

“Hartmut has given his name to me, so there is nothing to

worry about,” I said. “He cannot disobey me, so I will simply order him to keep everything that transpires here a secret.”

“I am delighted that you finally accepted my name, Lady Rozemyne,” Hartmut interjected, overflowing with enthusiasm. “It has been my wish to enter this hidden room ever since I discovered that you hold some of your most important discussions here.”

Benno watched us with an unsteady smile. I could tell that he wanted to leave and that the most pressing thought on his mind right now was probably “I can’t believe you accepted the name of someone like this.”

I wouldn’t have, but he was so damn insistent.

“Please, Lady Rozemyne, do not feel as though you need to hold anything back because I am here,” Hartmut said. “I already know that you are a former commoner, that Gunther is your father, and that you have known Benno since before joining the temple.”

I stared at him, completely taken aback. Benno’s expression was similarly rigid.

He continued, “I was able to determine as much simply by listening to the commoners in the workshop and the orphanage, and eliminating the contradictions as they came. Lord Ferdinand ultimately confirmed the accuracy of my conclusions. Thus, speak to your heart’s content. Pay me no mind at all.”

“Excuse me?!” I exclaimed. “How can you say all that and then expect me to act like it was nothing?! Am I the only one who didn’t know about this?! Damuel, did you know?!”

He looked just as shocked and frantically shook his head the moment our eyes met. “No, this is news to me as well.”

Hartmut wore a casual smile. “I thought that revealing my knowledge of your past before I gave my name would disquiet you, Lady Rozemyne.” He hadn’t wanted me to worry about how to keep him quiet, what the impact on the lower city might be, and what I would do if the truth spread to other nobles.

“Hartmut, have you told anyone else...?” I asked.

“I would never do something so wasteful. It took countless visits to the workshop and the orphanage to make those working there lower their guard around me. Then, I spent my time carefully deriving nuggets of valuable information from their banal remarks. They would never reveal anything outright, so I was forced to gradually crush the minor contradictions that arose and draw my final conclusions from there. As I said, I then confirmed my

suspicious with Lord Ferdinand, even at the risk of being executed on the spot. Why would I ever reveal such valuable information to anyone else when *I* was the one who worked so hard to discover it?”

Hartmut was looking at me as though I’d asked the most obvious question in the world, and that only confused me more. Things got even worse when I asked why he had gone to such lengths in the first place. In his words, he had wanted to figure out why I treasured Damuel as one of my retainers. Had he really worked so hard to learn something that he was going to keep entirely to himself...?

“Ngh... I’m exhausted already.”

Thanks to Hartmut, I was drained before we’d even had a chance to start our discussion. I slumped my shoulders, which prompted Benno—who was sitting across from me—to sit upright.

“So, what are we here to discuss?” he asked. “For you to have summoned us here when the merchants of other duchies could arrive at any moment, something drastic and unexpected must have occurred. Was there an incident during the Archduke Conference?” His dark-red eyes were narrowed as though he wanted to snap, “Hurry up. I’m busy.”

His assumption was correct; something drastic and unexpected *had* occurred. I straightened my back as well and said, “Everything I want the guildmaster to know is written here in this letter.” I presented the correspondence in question. “The matter I want to discuss with you, Benno, needs to be kept between us.”

“That was a given from the moment we entered this room,” Benno said. He took the letter, handed it to Mark, and then turned back to me, awaiting my next words.

“Although I cannot reveal the exact circumstances... I will need to leave Ehrenfest one year from now.”

“One year...? We already have the Groschel renovations in autumn, and the opening of a second Plantin Company store... and now you want us to go with you to another duchy next spring?” He was doing his very best to maintain a neutral expression, but I could tell that he wanted to scream, “Are you *trying* to kill me?!”

I frantically shook my head. “Not at all. I only have so much influence over the industry in Ehrenfest because of the aub’s permission. Elsewhere, underage children cannot be trusted with such matters, so those involved with the printing industry will not

be moved until three years from now, when I come of age. Before then, I must confirm the status of my destination, prepare to establish stores and workshops there, and—”

Benno raised a hand to interrupt my explanation, then crossed his arms and gave me an exasperated smirk. “In other words, we should prepare to leave a year from now.”

“Hm? No, I said three years because—”

“The time limits you provide are *always* shortened out of the blue. If we plan to have everything done in three years, we’ll never finish in time.”

“Wha—?! Benno, that’s so mean!” I glared at him. “I’m saying it won’t happen before I come of age!”

He scoffed. “There’s nothing mean about it; I’m speaking from experience. Will you be taking all of the Gutenbergs? When an archducal family member leaves their duchy to live elsewhere, their personnel go with them, right?”

“It would be nice if everyone came, but I would not like to force anyone. I am going somewhere far away, and you will not find yourselves entirely welcome. It is possible that I won’t be able to work with you directly as I do now, and taking everyone will slow down the growth of Ehrenfest’s printing industry.”

I didn’t want to take all of the Gutenbergs when they had only just finished training their successors.

“However,” I continued, “I do want a printing workshop where I am going. For that reason, once preparations have been made, I would ask the Gutenbergs to make a trip similar to their yearly ones, but that is all. I also intend to take a select few people with me before the three years are up, including Tuuli from the Gilberta Company and the Renaissance of the Dyeing Guild. Oh, and please inform everyone that those who accompany me will have the chance to bring their families with them, should they wish to.”

“Understood.”

“As for my chefs, I wish to bring Ella and Hugo. Their families are welcome to come as well, but could the arrangements be made stealthily? Ella is currently on break for her pregnancy.”

I went on to note that the apprentice chefs coming from the lower city to train would use Philine’s chambers. Then I continued, “The kitchen should not encounter any issues as long as Nicola is there. I am going to fund the orphanage director’s chambers for the three years until Philine comes of age, so we can expect things to

remain as they are.”

“I see,” Benno replied. “Who will be in charge of the Rozemyne Workshop? Printing is a duchy industry, so we won’t be able to purchase the workshop ourselves, will we?”

Indeed, the Plantin Company would not be able to own and operate the workshop when it was located in the temple’s orphanage as part of a duchy industry.

“I should not be getting involved,” I said, “but I believe that assigning Gil to Philine and then keeping things as they are should suffice for the next three years.”

“And after that...?”

“The position of orphanage director should go to an archducal retainer or perhaps even Mother. We can only hope that they will train their scholars well enough over the three years afforded to them. It would seem that Dirk and Konrad are aiming to become a noble and a blue priest who can protect the orphanage and workshop, so I would recommend teaching them while you have the opportunity.” I made sure to mention that Konrad specifically wanted to become a *merchant-oriented* priest.

Benno’s lips curved into an amused grin. “Tell me, if you intend to move the Gutenbergs, what will happen to Gil and the other gray priests?”

“Three years from now, when my personnel move, I intend to purchase them as employees for a new printing workshop and ask them to join me alongside Philine. I will also buy Nicola at that time.”

In short, everyone slotted into one of three groups: those being left behind, those coming with me, and those who would join me after three years. I would need to discuss each individual with Sylvester and ensure that nobody was purchased by anyone else. If I explained that some of them were being left behind so that the industry wouldn’t collapse and used trump cards during my negotiations with the others, I was sure I would be able to manage.

“Hm.” Benno nodded. “I now understand how you intend to mobilize your personnel and carry out the handover. Once the Gutenbergs return from Kirnberger, you can trust me to lay all the necessary groundwork. Now...” He eyed me carefully. “Is the Plantin Company included among those personnel you require to go with you?”

Elvira had told me to state my desires outright. And since

neither Hartmut nor Damuel could see my face from where they were waiting behind me, I gave Benno a provocative grin, as I'd always done so long ago.

"Naturally, I would be delighted if the Plantin Company were to accompany me. Your presence would hearten me, and it would make welcoming the Gutenbergs in three years' time that much easier. However, as I expected, you are currently drowning in work. Whether you are able to come will depend on your skill."

"Oho... My skill, you say?" Benno smiled in response, making it clear that he had accepted my challenge. First, though... I needed to order some trombe paper.

"As I expect this will not be an easy move, I will cooperate by bringing wealth to your store. I have a sizable order for you: sell me all the fireproof paper you have."

"Fireproof paper? And... all of it?"

"At Ferdinand's request, I desire at least three hundred sheets."

Not even trombe paper was good enough to be described as "maximal quality." We would need to carry out more research and return to brewing to improve it even further. Unless we acted fast, we wouldn't finish in time.

"I intend to have our workshops focus on making it," I said, "so if you have any stock, I shall take it all. The sooner, the better."

"Our entire stock..." Benno muttered. "Will you be able to pay immediately?"

"Absolutely. I have the funds that Ferdinand left behind." It technically wasn't my money, but I didn't see an issue with using it for his sake. Plus, it wasn't like I didn't have my own income.

"As soon as we return to the store, I will check our stock and ask Mark to deliver as much as we have," Benno said. It made sense that he was entrusting such a large order to his right-hand man.

I turned to Mark, who was standing behind Benno, and gave him my thanks. He nodded in response, wearing his usual calm smile.

Once my discussion with Benno was over, Hartmut began moaning that he envied those whom I trusted so readily. I replied that he had my trust as well, and that he could strengthen it by training Melchior and his attendants, then immediately started pushing him toward the High Priest's chambers.

Next, upon returning to the High Bishop's chambers, I told

everyone in no uncertain terms that Philine was going to become the orphanage director once I was gone, and that Monika and the others would transition to serving her. My temple attendants were evidently relieved to hear that my replacement would be a noble with whom they were already familiar.

“Monika shall serve as her attendant,” I said, “and I will assign Lily to oversee the orphanage once Wilma is gone. Now then, Philine... You only have a year to prepare—half a year, if we subtract the time we are going to spend at the Royal Academy. Let us begin the handover posthaste.”

I asked Monika to gather documents related to running the orphanage and stack them in front of our future director. Then I continued, “The documents before you detail the orphanage’s cash flow over the past year; as its new director, you will need to understand how much money it requires each season. I should note that there were some unusual circumstances this year with the children of the former Veronica faction and the aub’s funds. Monika, do keep that in mind when you are guiding Philine through this.”

“Understood, Lady Rozemyne.”

Philine stared at the mountain of documents in astonishment, but only for a moment; she quickly got a hold of herself and picked up the board on top of the pile. Monika leaned over to read it as well, and together they began working their way through it.

“Fran,” I said, “please prepare some tea for Mark as well as the payment to be given to him upon his return.”

“Understood.”

As I opened my hidden room—we would store the trombe paper that Mark brought inside—an ordonnanz flew in and settled on my arm. “It has been some time, Lady Rozemyne,” it said. “This is Brigitte of Illgner. We have prepared your fey paper and are ready to have it teleported to the castle at your convenience. What date would be ideal? We would also ask that the payment and the feystones to cover the teleportation be sent back to us with the boxes we shall provide.”

I could practically feel my eyes sparkling. Her timing couldn’t have been better!

“Lady Rozemyne,” Roderick suddenly interjected, “for this research, it would be better if we used the castle’s workshop.”

“And why is that...?” I asked, tilting my head at him.

“Clarissa cannot enter the one in the temple, so she would make an enormous fuss if we did our work there. I also believe that the brewing will proceed much faster with the support of two mana-rich archscholars, and the castle will give us access to those who performed last year’s joint research with Drewanchel, such as Lord Ignaz and Lady Marianne.”

It was my scholars’ duty to do my brewing—or at least support me when I did my own—so Clarissa would go absolutely crazy if we left her out. Roderick was making some excellent points, but I couldn’t agree right away.

“I cannot say I am too enthusiastic about brewing in the castle. Isn’t everyone there immensely busy at the moment? I expect it would cause quite a fuss if people learned that I was brewing for Ferdinand.”

“Lady Rozemyne, you have *two* workshops now, do you not?” Damuel noted. “I would suggest brewing in your library. Clarissa can join you there.”

I clapped my hands together. My library’s workshop would allow Clarissa to brew without also subjecting me to any number of unwanted interjections. It would also be a good place to search for other ingredients.

I sent a response to Brigitte asking her to send the paper tomorrow at third bell, then sent an *ordonnanz* to Lieseleta in the castle informing her of the situation and asking her to prepare the payment, some feystones, and the people necessary to load the paper into my highbeast. I also sent an *ordonnanz* to Lasfam stating my intentions for the library over the coming days.

It was just before sixth bell—the end of the workday—when Mark slid into the room with a box in his arms. The Plantin Company really had thrown together its remaining stock of trombe paper. I asked Fran to confirm how many sheets there were, then gave Mark an appropriate payment: five large golds. My retainers were dazed to see me hand over so much, but that didn’t matter to me.

I got Fran and Zahm to take the paper into the hidden room, then had them check to see whether the workshop had any for me to purchase. I needed as much as I could get my hands on right now.

“Roderick, when you return to the castle, ask Wilfried’s and

Charlotte's retainers whether there is any fey paper left over from our joint research with Drewanchel. I will purchase any that they have tomorrow."

The next day, I moved the fey paper being stored in the temple into my Pandabus, then flew to the castle as scheduled. Lieseleta had already collected the paper from Illgner, which she then added to our stock. From there, I went to my library with Clarissa and Hartmut—plus my guard knights, of course—to support their brewing.

"Good morning," I said to Lasfam.

"Lady Rozemyne. I have long awaited your return," he replied with a smile. "Do come in; tea has been prepared."

I decided to take a short break while the servants brought the paper in from my highbeast. As I was sipping my drink, Lasfam handed me a sound-blocker, then asked for more information about Ferdinand and the terms I'd negotiated for him.

"Lord Ferdinand entrusted everything to you, Lady Rozemyne, so why has the aub suddenly been put in charge?" he inquired. "Might I request an explanation?"

Hartmut and Clarissa still needed to get everything ready before they could brew, so we had plenty of time for a chat. I explained the rumors about my relationship with Ferdinand that had spread among the nobles, and the general opinion that it was strange for me to look after his belongings when I wasn't related to him or still under his care. To remedy this, the castle had agreed to start overseeing his luggage, though I would remain in possession of the estate and its key. I also mentioned that Aub Ahrensbach had passed away, that Ferdinand and Detlinde's wedding had been delayed a year, and that I'd negotiated with the royal family to secure Ferdinand both a hidden room and a guarantee that he wouldn't be punished by association.

Last of all, I mentioned our reason for coming to the estate today: I was going to use the ingredients I was gathering to make Ferdinand some maximal-quality fey paper—at his request, of course.

"And so," I concluded, "he is receiving a hidden room in Ahrensbach."

"That is wonderful indeed," Lasfam said, still wearing a smile as he praised me. "After all, here at this estate, Lord Ferdinand spent

more time in his workshop than anywhere else.”

“Indeed. Please gather together the tools and ingredients we are to send to him, then have them sent to the castle. The aub will bring them with him when visiting Ahrensbach for the summer funeral.”

“How many books from the library would you like me to include?”

“None. All the books in the library now belong to me.” Lasfam met my immediate refusal with wide eyes, so I quickly continued, “Though, um... I would not mind if you were to send him transcriptions of your own making. I expect that Ferdinand will need his research documents and the like.”

Lasfam gazed down at me and smiled. “My intention was not to take away what is rightfully yours. A portion of the books in Lord Ferdinand’s collection were given to him by Heidemarie; I merely thought that Eckhart would appreciate the chance to see them again.”



“Oh, I see. I do not know much about Heidemarie, unfortunately.” I understood that she was Eckhart’s late wife, but that was about it—nobody had seemed willing to tell me anything else. According to Lasfam, she had been in a similar situation as Philine; a second wife forced upon her father by the Veronica faction had taken over her house.

He continued, “As this wife began selling and pawning many of the house’s belongings, Heidemarie took all the books that remained in their library and brought them to Lord Ferdinand. She made it clear that she would not hand over her house’s valuable knowledge to the Veronica faction, and instead offered the books to him.”

I instinctively looked toward the library. How many of the books in there belonged to Heidemarie? Above all else, though, I was sincerely thankful that no valuable books had ended up being carelessly disposed of.

“Eckhart always stayed away from the library because it reminded him of Heidemarie,” Lasfam said, “but I believe that the wounds of his heart have since healed. Last year, he went inside and gazed fondly upon her books.”

“I see...”

As silence fell, Clarissa entered the room—an indication that she was ready to brew. “I am so glad to finally have this chance to do scholar work for you, Lady Rozemyne,” she said, hungrily urging me to stand up. “Just last night, I was looking over the joint research with Drewanchel and seeing what I could improve upon.”

Lasfam watched us with an expression that resembled nostalgia. “Lady Rozemyne, how long will you be staying in the workshop?” he asked.

“Well... I need to have samples of the ‘maximal-quality’ fey paper ready before the funeral, plus I will need to confirm that Ferdinand is doing well, so... I expect to stay in the workshop for several days.” That appeared to worry Lasfam, so I quickly added, “Fear not—unlike Ferdinand, I shall willingly take breaks to eat and such.”

Lasfam gave a wry smile and nodded. “Understood.”

Making Maximal-Quality Samples

After looking over the paper and tools lined up on the workshop table, I turned to Hartmut and Clarissa and said, “Shall we begin?” Our first task was to check the elements and quality of our ingredients, which I started doing with some of the tools Ferdinand had left behind. My current plan was to see how much we could improve the effon and nanseb paper through experimentation before working on the rarer trombe paper.

“You want *this* to reach maximal quality...?” Clarissa asked, frowning as she held up a small piece of effon paper. It was made by commoners without using mana, so its quality as a magic tool was fairly low—it had few elements, weak elemental power, and a low capacity for mana. It paled in comparison to trombe paper, which was the highest-quality paper we had.

To clarify, “maximal” was not just an arbitrary descriptor Ferdinand had tossed out for emphasis. Rather, ingredients were strictly delineated into tiers based on a variety of criteria which could be objectively measured. There was maximal quality, high quality, normal quality, and low quality, for starters, and Ferdinand wanted nothing but maximal-quality paper. It was worth noting that the same ingredient or material could be placed into different tiers based on the criteria used; an ingredient that was maximal quality in terms of mana capacity would not necessarily be maximal quality in terms of elemental affinity. Ferdinand wanted paper that was maximal quality in terms of mana capacity.

Clarissa continued, “Lord Ferdinand did not specify what materials we should use to make his paper, so why not use feybeast skin, as is customary? That would greatly simplify this process.”

Indeed, parchment made from feybeast skin was far superior to everything we had prepared—even the trombe paper. It was the kind of paper on which one would draw magic circles to support one’s brewing and magic, so its production process was taught at the Royal Academy. That didn’t mean it was easy to make, though; ingredients of an especially high quality were necessary to use the

paper for an advanced spell, and to obtain those high-quality ingredients, one would need to secure a strong feybeast and collect its skin.

“Feybeast skin would be ideal if our aim were simply to improve the quality of our paper, but Ferdinand has requested at least three hundred sheets,” I said. There was an abundance of materials in his workshop, but not even those would be enough. “If we were to gather the skin ourselves, how many dangerous feybeasts would we need to capture? As long as Ferdinand receives maximal-quality paper, I do not think he will mind what materials we use.”

Hartmut nodded. “Once a feybeast has been slain, its skin disappears alongside everything else. Gathering such a massive quantity of the stuff would be anything but simple. Even if all of Lady Rozemyne’s guard knights were to mobilize, I doubt we would be able to get enough in time.”

“I think I could manage it,” Clarissa replied, her blue eyes burning with determination. It wouldn’t have surprised me to learn that Dunkelfelger’s scholars went hunting as well.

Three years might have been enough time for Clarissa to gradually acquire enough materials, but not when we were this busy with handover work. I could guess that Ferdinand had made this request of me because he knew our only option was to improve the quality of our feyplant paper ourselves.

“Still, three hundred sheets of maximal quality...” Clarissa murmured. “I wonder, how does Lord Ferdinand intend to use them?”

“A normal person would probably use them in extreme moderation,” I replied, “but this is Ferdinand. I expect him to use them unsparingly to make his brewing easier.”

I couldn’t even begin to imagine why Ferdinand would need so much paper, but I remembered that he had used tons when brewing. I was well aware by now that one could not trust him to brew with common sense.

“For now,” I continued, “let us focus on improving the quality of the paper we have with us, using our joint research with Drewanchel as a base.”

We started removing mana impurities from the paper and stirring in high-quality ingredients of the same element, hoping to see some improvements. It took us more attempts than I cared to

count, but the effon and nanseb paper eventually went from being low quality to normal.

“But this still isn’t good enough...” I sighed. We had brewed the paper again and again and again, but it was improving at a snail’s pace. It was starting to bother me. Before now, I’d only ever used recipes that Ferdinand had perfected through extensive experimentation or that Raimund had already improved in my stead; I’d never had to go through the mind-numbing trial and error of attempting to make my own improvements. I couldn’t help but despair that things weren’t going as smoothly as I’d anticipated.

“How is Ferdinand able to make new magic tools and improve them so easily?” I mused aloud. “My spirit is already about to break.”

“Do not look so down,” Hartmut said, trying to encourage me. “We have already made some progress, and it is only our first day. The sound-producing fey paper is now much easier on the ear, and the paper that can re-collect itself now works faster than ever before.”

I turned my attention to the results of our labor. Before, the effon paper had only been able to produce a jerky sequence of noises, but improving its quality had smoothed that out. The sounds it made were now impressive enough that it could probably be used in some equivalent of a music box. As for the nanseb paper, its smaller pieces had only crawled toward the larger ones before, but now they moved at a much brisker pace.

“Still, this is nowhere near the maximal quality that Ferdinand wants...”

“We have a long road ahead of us, but it should also be interesting to see how the paper changes as its quality improves further. Let us put our all into it.”

Hartmut and Clarissa chugged heavy-duty mana rejuvenation potions, then suggested that we take a break for lunch. I agreed—I was getting fed up with brewing anyway—and together we exited the workshop.

As we ate, we discussed ways that we could improve the paper even more. “Lady Rozemyne, let us increase their elements,” Hartmut suggested. “Seeking out materials with a high affinity for the paper might prove troublesome, but if we are successful, our efforts will improve its quality. Shall we add new ingredients in the hope of making our paper omni-elemental?”

"I expect this to lead to even more failures, but... I suppose we have no other choice," I conceded.

Starting that afternoon, I selected some random high-quality ingredients from the workshop and gradually added them to our brew. If any of them induced a positive change, I would add more and observe the results. This process of trial and error succeeded in giving the paper more elements, but its quality didn't improve enough to bump it up a tier.

This is just getting annoying.

It was one thing to brew while following a recipe, but I really wasn't fond of spending ages experimenting as we were. This wasn't like reading where I could remain fully immersed for hours and hours every single day—we were just getting started, yet I was already feeling the strain.

During our next break, my usual cup of tea was replaced with a rejuvenation potion. According to Hartmut and Clarissa, we had made exceedingly good progress for a single day of work, but I had to purse my lips at how slow-moving it felt.

"Few people can make their mana last as long as yours does, Lady Rozemyne, so brewing is seldom repeated this often in quick succession," Hartmut explained. "You have experimented as much in one day as an archnoble such as I would manage in three."

Because of my abundance of mana, I was better able to rely on brute force when doing my experiments. This made me a lot more effective than other scholars, as we had seen through our results thus far.

"Hmm... If my strength is my excessive mana, then perhaps we should next add gold dust to the brew. After all, those are clumps of pure mana, right? It could make the quality of our paper shoot up all at once."

"*Your* gold dust...?" Hartmut repeated. "That certainly could produce a substantial increase in the quality—and since it is your own mana, it should add some familiarity as well."

I drank another rejuvenation potion, then started draining feystones of any miscellaneous mana to make them purer. Then I poured my own mana into the feystones to turn them into gold dust, one after another. Hartmut and Clarissa watched the spectacle with wide eyes.

Oh yeah... Lady Hannelore was just as surprised when I made gold dust during our archduke candidate class.

But while Hannelore had seemed a bit repulsed, Hartmut and Clarissa leaned forward and intently stared at me, a distinct sparkle in their eyes. That made for two very distinct ways of expressing surprise.

“Such intoxicating magnificence!” Clarissa exclaimed.

“I would expect nothing less from the wondrous Lady Rozemyne,” Hartmut added. “A normal scholar would never do this for fear of wasting both their mana and their feystones!”

And so, as planned, we used the gold dust made during our break to further improve our paper. I stirred the pot and poured in my mana while sprinkling in some gold dust as well. Once we were done, I cut up the effon paper and placed the pieces on the tools for detecting quality and elements.

“Oh, it actually *did* turn into high-quality, omni-elemental paper...”

It had taken a stupid amount of mana, but the quality had shot right up. It still wasn’t *maximal*, though.

“I don’t know what we can do to improve it any further...” I said. “I wish Ferdinand were here to tell me.”

To my surprise, I was the only one losing hope and getting depressed. Hartmut and Clarissa looked genuinely moved as they inspected the improved paper; then they started doing all sorts of tests with it.

“Lady Rozemyne, if we use this fey paper’s new attribute of reforming itself, we might be able to reuse the same sheet over and over again!” Clarissa exclaimed, her eyes sparkling.

As it turned out, fragments of the improved nanseb paper could actually fuse together again instead of merely gathering in one spot. That was an amusing development, but it didn’t change the fact that I needed *maximal-quality* fey paper.

“Lady Rozemyne, this paper produces sounds so smooth that I would almost think it were singing to me!” Hartmut professed. “It may be able to reproduce not just sheet music but also the chants of spells, assuming that the correct magic circles are drawn upon it. Let us experiment to see how much support they can provide.”

“Hartmut, Clarissa, I am not interested in either of your suggestions,” I said, “but you are welcome to carry out such experiments yourselves, if you wish.”

My task was to improve the quality of the paper, not find uses for its enhanced attributes. We’d experimented with gold dust, but

not even that had raised the quality above high. It seemed best to stop brewing for today and start thinking about how to break through the next quality barrier.

“*Stylo*,” Hartmut and Clarissa said in unison. Normal writing utensils would only work on low-quality fey paper, so they were going to use their schtappes instead. Magic-tool pens that used mana as ink were also an option.

“Lady Rozemyne... we have a problem,” Hartmut said. “Not even a stylo can write on this paper.”

Frantic, I examined the effon paper. No matter how many times Hartmut ran his schtappe pen across it, no marks appeared.

Clarissa was experiencing the same problem. “It feels as though your mana is so strong that it deflects my own,” she said. “Could *you* try writing on the paper?”

I transformed my schtappe and gave it a go. A line formed without any issue. Hartmut nodded and said that this was a reasonable development, since I was the one who had made the paper, but the blood still drained from my face.

I sighed. “If only I can use the paper, we have failed. This won’t be of any use to Ferdinand, even if we manage to make it maximal quality as he requested.”

“It isn’t particularly rare for a magic tool to be usable only by its creator or those with more mana than them,” Hartmut remarked. “Clarissa and I will try to make some high-quality fey paper as well. If you are able to use it, Lady Rozemyne, then Lord Ferdinand should be able to use yours. He... He *does* have more mana than you, right?”

Hearing the worry in Hartmut’s voice made me a little worried too. I’d made sure to spread my mana thin at the Royal Academy so that it wouldn’t overflow, and while this had allowed my body to grow, it hadn’t done much to improve my capacity. My schtappe *had* grown, though, and I was back to compressing my mana as much as I’d used to for religious ceremonies, the entwickeln, and past brews. I would probably be able to hold more mana to match how much bigger I’d gotten.

Even then, I don’t think I’ve surpassed Ferdinand. Nothing strange had happened when I’d used the shining ink, so it seemed very unlikely.

“Yes, I would think so,” I replied.

“I wonder about that... In my opinion, it will only be a matter

of time before you overtake him.”

“Well, I don’t intend to push my body to an unnatural degree as he does.”

I wasn’t about to become a mad scientist who compressed her mana to the point of developing mana sickness. But despite my declaration, Hartmut and Clarissa began giddily discussing how much they were looking forward to my coming of age.

“It will take Clarissa and me much longer to prepare gold dust than it took you, Lady Rozemyne, so let us continue this tomorrow. We shall have everything ready by then.”

“Certainly.”

I gave them rejuvenation potions and some purified feystones, praying for their success. Their results tomorrow would tell us whether we could expect Ferdinand to be able to use my paper.

Hartmut and Clarissa returned the next day with the required amount of gold dust—though it had apparently been quite a struggle to obtain—and started brewing fey paper. As I waited for them to finish, I drew magic circles on the high-quality paper I’d made yesterday and performed the experiments that had interested them.

Just as Hartmut had predicted, channeling mana into a magic circle drawn on the effon paper caused the chant to be performed automatically. It required a bit more mana than usual, but it could prove useful in situations when one couldn’t chant, or when the chant was just too ridiculously long.

Still, the problem is that I’m the only one who can draw on it right now.

Clarissa had hoped to make the nanseb paper reusable, but not even our high-quality version was that durable. It erupted into golden flames as any other paper would, leaving only a few burning fragments behind. I had to admit, there was something quite satisfying about them gathering together on their own.

“Lady Rozemyne, we’ve finished,” my two scholars eventually announced. They had each made some high-quality fey paper, which I attempted to draw on. I could put a clear line on Hartmut’s but nothing on Clarissa’s.

“Does this mean Clarissa has more mana than I do?” I asked.

“Absolutely not,” they both replied at once. The speed with which I’d turned my feystones into gold dust made it clear that I

was still very much ahead, but it hadn't even been a genuine question. I'd asked them in jest, assuming that the answer was obvious.

"What is causing this, then?" I asked, cocking my head at them.

Clarissa immediately came up with an idea: "It must be the name-swearing! That's about the only distinction between Hartmut and me, in any case."

I really didn't want to believe that the name-swearing was the *only* distinction between them, but she was probably right. "As name-swearing binds one in the mana of another, that most likely is having an impact."

It was through name-swearing that Roderick had managed to become omni-elemental, at least to some degree. Hartmut was similarly under the influence of my mana, which seemed to explain why I could write only on his paper.

"If our suspicions are correct and the paper can be written on only by its creator or the person to whom they are name-sworn, then it really is a failure," I said.

"The problem is that the paper deflects mana, correct?" Hartmut asked. "Perhaps we could try adding mana-absorbing ingredients."

I gave him a quizzical look. "Do you mean black feystones?"

"If we can use ingredients harvested from Darkness fey creatures to add absorption properties to the paper—without changing its fundamental qualities, of course—then we should be able to apply mana ink to it."

Darkness fey creatures? Does he mean things like ternisbefallens and trombes?

I gazed at the trombe paper while recalling the Darkness fey creatures I'd encountered in the past. "I see. Let us try that, then."

I tried to fuse a sheet of trombe paper with the high-quality effon paper that Hartmut had made. Then I gave the finished product to Clarissa, who cut off one of the corners and attempted to draw on it.

"I can do it, Lady Rozemyne!" she exclaimed. Hartmut's idea had worked—and the quality of the paper had risen, putting it just a few notches below maximal. That was probably because the trombe paper had chugged so much of my mana while I was brewing it.

Next, I drew some time-saving magic circles and used them to raise the quality of the effon paper. By the time I was done, it had

adopted the trombe paper's fireproof attribute alongside its own chant-repeating attribute.

"Lady Rozemyne, this fireproof paper hasn't yet reached the high-quality tier, right?" Clarissa asked, blinking in surprise. The paper was burning up wherever she drew on it.

"Indeed. I used it as it was earlier. Increasing the quality even further might allow it to remain completely intact. There doesn't seem to be much conflict between different kinds of paper, so we might as well try to make them all high quality and brew them together."

And that was what we did. It had sounded reasonably simple, but it was a kind of brewing which required an insane amount of mana. We had to create gold dust to elevate each sheet to the high-quality tier in the first place, and it took extra mana to fuse high-quality ingredients.

In the end, though, our hard work bore fruit—we had made some maximal-quality fey paper. Hartmut and Clarissa attempted to draw on a torn-off scrap, and neither one of them had any trouble. The fragment then floated over to the sheet it had come from, and the two fused back into a full piece of paper.

Adding a magic circle to the paper resulted in a sheet that could cast magic spells simply by being provided with mana, did not completely burn up on its own, and could reform itself afterward. "I don't really know how this paper should be used... but it should satisfy Ferdinand, right?" I asked Hartmut while showing him.

He smiled and nodded. "I doubt there is a single scholar in the world who would be able to find a fault with this paper. That said... I also don't expect anyone else to be able to make it."

"Well, it certainly was a little inconvenient."

To reach this point, we had needed to use gold dust to increase the quality of our paper from low to high. Then we had needed to fuse three of our newly improved sheets. The end result was some ultra-expensive fey paper that cost an insane amount of time and mana to make.

Incidentally, fusing the three sheets of paper created a larger one the size of two smaller sheets put together. Most people would think to halve it, but the pieces would always put themselves back together, which was annoyingly inflexible.

"It took me an entire night of drinking rejuvenation potions to make enough gold dust for *one* sheet of high-quality paper," Clarissa

said, “then the brewing itself required me to drink another. As far as I’m concerned, this was more than just ‘a little inconvenient.’” It was her job as a scholar to brew in my stead, so her struggle to do it meaningfully was making her feel inadequate. “I have no choice but to increase my mana capacity and pray to the gods for more divine protections!”

While Clarissa burned with renewed determination to be of as much use to me as possible, Hartmut curiously reached out to the trombe paper. “Lady Rozemyne, what material is this fireproof paper made from?” he asked. “You purchased it from the Plantin Company rather than from Illgner, so it must be made by either the Rozemyne Workshop or some local paper-making workshops.”

I smiled. “It’s made using wood from a growy-stretchy tree.”

“A growy-stretchy tree?” Hartmut looked even more curious. “I have heard the orphanage children mention it before, but I did not realize it produced the wood used to make this paper. I wonder, what feyplant could it be...?”

I didn’t mind telling Hartmut, since he had given his name to me, but I couldn’t say anything when Clarissa was here too. Instead, I moved the conversation along. “We have a sizable stock of fey paper from Illgner, but there won’t be enough of the fireproof kind for our needs. We will need to make so much more over the summer.”

I started calculating how many taues we would need while making another sheet of maximal-quality paper. This one would go to Ahrensbach with Sylvester—and if it received a coveted “very good” from Ferdinand, we would start mass-producing it.

“My intention is to have Sylvester take not only these samples but also brewing implements and materials,” I said. “We will need to prepare for that.”

I fished through the workshop, looking for things that Sylvester could take with him to Ahrensbach’s funeral. I wanted to send Ferdinand some ingredients for rejuvenation potions and poison antidotes, at the very least. Hartmut and Clarissa joined me, seemingly enjoying themselves.

The spring coming-of-age ceremony was right around the corner—and that meant summer was too.

The Spring Coming-of-Age Ceremony and Sylvester's Departure

After completing the samples, I returned to normal life in the temple. The spring coming-of-age ceremony was tomorrow, but a debate had arisen in the High Bishop's chambers between my attendants and me. I'd asked them to tell Melchior and the other apprentice blues to take part in the ceremony... but they had refused.

"But why?" I asked, pouting at Fran. "This might not be so important for the other apprentice blues, but as the future High Bishop, Melchior absolutely needs to participate."

Fran exchanged a glance with Zahm, who grimly shook his head, then said, "Lord Melchior and the other apprentice blues are underage. They cannot take part in the ceremony."

Melchior's participation would make the handover easier, and my aim was to get the other blues involved in a ceremony before the Harvest Festival in autumn. But minors weren't allowed to participate, and my attendants were standing by that custom.

"Have I not performed rituals as the High Bishop despite being underage?" I asked.

"Yes, but as you said, that was as the High Bishop. Back when you were only an ap—" Fran stopped mid-sentence, not wanting to say "apprentice blue shrine maiden" in front of my noble retainers. We were falsifying my age on top of sanitizing my family register, so it was best to avoid bringing up the past so suddenly. "Back before you took your current role, it would have been unthinkable for you to participate. Lord Melchior will similarly need to wait for when he is made High Bishop."

"It's true that I wasn't able to participate in the baptism or coming-of-age ceremonies," I said, "but there must be exceptions. Back then, Lord Ferdinand ordered me to take part in both the healing ceremony after the trombe hunt *and* Spring Prayer."

Playing the Ferdinand card ended up being a tremendous idea;

as his former attendants, Fran and Zahm both faltered.

“That was due to there being a shortage of blue priests in the temple,” Fran eventually said. “There were no other options.”

“And now we have even fewer blue priests and an even more dire situation on our hands,” I replied. “I would not be making this suggestion if we had a satisfactory number of adults, but alas.”

No matter how much my attendants protested, I was determined to make this happen. The temple only had *seven* adult blue priests at the moment. So extreme was the shortage that underage archduke candidates were circling the duchy and just barely keeping the ceremonies alive. It would only take Wilfried or Charlotte deciding that they didn’t want to participate this year—whether because of the Leisegangs’ taunts before or because of the extra work brought about by Florencia’s pregnancy—for everything to fall apart. I assumed both would participate so that they could get more divine protections, but considering how much work everyone was already having to balance, I didn’t want to make them cover too much ground. In the worst-case scenario, the temple would need to figure things out on its own.

“In truth,” I said, “we are so desperately in need of manpower that we won’t have enough people unless we involve the apprentice blues. I would ask them to participate in the Harvest Festival not just for our sake but for their own as well. Unlike most other blue priests, those who came during spring cannot rely on their families for support; they will need to prepare for winter using only the duchy’s subsidies and their income from the Harvest Festival.”

We had taken money from the priests’ parents in the former Veronica faction, but we didn’t know how much of that Sylvester would dedicate to the orphanage and temple. The funds were meant to cover their education in the orphanage and Royal Academy more than anything else, so the priests would need to finance their own winter preparations by visiting the duchy’s provinces and farming villages for Spring Prayer and the Harvest Festival.

“Assuming that they travel to farming towns in the autumn for the Harvest Festival,” I continued, “the priests will need to perform baptisms, Starbindings, and coming-of-age ceremonies all at once. Is that not true? We cannot expect them to learn so much on the spot. Based on my own experiences, I would rather we give them an opportunity to get used to these duties sooner.”

I knew how nerve-racking it was having to think on your feet—

after all, I'd needed to perform ceremonies immediately after becoming the High Bishop. I'd at least known what commoner baptisms were like after participating in one as Myne, but these kids hadn't seen a single commoner ceremony in their lives.

"Next year, when I take my leave, how many blue priests will the temple need to replace me? They still cannot use their highbeasts, and they have barely any mana because they have yet to attend the Royal Academy. I suspect they will *all* need to participate, and with that in mind, it would be best to give them plenty of experience now, while I am here to oversee them."

Melchior would be in quite a sticky situation if he had to send underage apprentices all over the duchy immediately after becoming High Bishop. I was the one who had proposed housing the children in the orphanage and the temple in the first place, so it was important that I also ensured their lives as apprentice blues were tolerable.

Fran nodded. "You do have a point, Lady Rozemyne. However, at the very least, please wait until the summer coming-of-age ceremony. We will need time to get everything ready, and the blue priests will surely have their own thoughts on the matter. Ceremonial robes will also need to be prepared, even if the priests are merely watching."

I nodded, in full support of the idea. An entire season would give them enough time to prepare new ceremonial robes and communicate with the attendants assigned to the blue priests. Observing the summer coming-of-age ceremony and the autumn baptisms would be enough for the apprentices to grasp the flow of the ceremonies and how they should carry themselves.

"In that case, I will entrust the preparations and communicating with the blue priests to all of you," I said. "Tell them that they may buy their own ceremonial robes, should they have the money. Those who don't can have alterations made to the robes left by the previous blue priests and shrine maidens."

Back in my day, I'd had no choice but to buy my own robes; the previous High Bishop had said that none of the temple's spares would fit me before making various other excuses, more than a few of which had to do with my being a commoner. Because of the purge, however, we now had plenty more blue robes. They would only end up deteriorated if we kept them in storage, so it was better to put them to use if we could.

“Understood,” Fran replied. “We shall inform the blue priests’ attendants that their charges are to participate in the Harvest Festival, and instruct them to begin the required preparations and education. After that, we will gather the opinions of the blue priests themselves, all so that Lord Melchior and the other apprentice blues can observe the summer coming-of-age ceremony and the autumn baptism in preparation for the Harvest Festival.”

Our debate concluded with an agreement that my attendants would start their preparations now but only formally announce our plans after the spring coming-of-age ceremony had concluded.

So came the coming-of-age ceremony. I was pretty nervous, to be honest; Tuuli was going to come of age this summer, which was fine, but Lutz’s older brother Ralph was supposed to be coming of age *today*. Out of everyone from my Myne days who didn’t know I was now Rozemyne, Lutz’s brothers were the most likely to recognize me. I’d managed to avoid Zasha’s and Sieg’s ceremonies... but there was nothing I could do to escape this one.

Ralph won’t recognize me, right? I wondered, looking in a mirror and pinching at my outfit. I’d changed so much from when I was a little girl dressed in ragged clothes, and there was a good chance that he didn’t even remember his sickly neighbor who had died all those years ago; Lutz and Tuuli certainly hadn’t said anything about Myne since rumors of a tiny High Bishop had spread throughout the city.

I doubt I’ll even be able to recognize him, so... Yeah. This is going to be fine.

After reassuring myself, I went to the chapel with Fran and my guard knights.

“The High Bishop shall now enter!”

The chapel door creaked open, and all eyes immediately fell on me. It was unnerving. I ascended the stage with the bible in hand, listening to the whispers among the crowd.

Which one’s Ralph?

I squinted a little as I scanned the new adults. Ralph was sure to be somewhere among them, but they were all so mature that it was hard to tell them apart—especially when they were all dressed in green, the divine color of spring.

He has red hair, right? So he could be that person, that person, or that person... Mm, that guy looks a bit like him. Is that Ralph? I can’t

really tell.

I was examining the Ralph look-alike, making sure not to let my noble smile slip from my face, when he squinted back at me and cocked his head to one side. He seemed to be sizing me up in turn.

Oh no. Has he noticed something? Have I made him suspicious?

I quickly looked down at the bible and started performing the ceremony as usual, maintaining the fake smile I'd managed to hone so well throughout my life as a noble.

"O Flutrane, Goddess of Water, hear my prayers. May you grace those who have newly come of age with your blessing. May those who offer their prayers and gratitude be blessed with your divine protection."

That blessing marked the end of the ceremony. As the new adults filtered out of the chapel, Ralph stopped and glanced over his shoulder, looking at me one last time before finally leaving.

E-Eep... I really want to know whether he recognized me, but trying to find out might just make things worse. What should I do? I guess Tuuli or Benno would send word if something really bad happened. Maybe I should just wait and see for now...

After the spring coming-of-age ceremony concluded, a temple meeting was held with the apprentice blues in attendance. According to Zahm, who had taken care of the groundwork, the adult blue priests were just as fed up with the lack of manpower as everyone else, so they were fully in support of the apprentices helping out. The majority had actually said that they *expected* the apprentices to work, since they were being supported by the archduke.

I informed the apprentice blues that they would need to participate in the Harvest Festival due to both the lack of manpower and the need for them to fund their own winter preparations. This would require them to memorize prayers, obtain ceremonial robes, arrange carriages for their trips, and sort out chefs and food to be taken with them. I thought it was a bit unreasonable to expect so much of minors performing the ceremony for the very first time, so as a one-off, I decided to pair the apprentices with adult blue priests.

"Um, Sister... May I have a moment of your time?" Nikolaus asked, looking a bit concerned. He had likely only approached me because Matthias and Judithe were guarding me today rather than

Cornelius, who would have stared daggers at him the moment he tried to get close.

“You may. Do you have a question?”

“Yes. Is Father going to help with my winter preparations?”

Some of the children had lost both of their parents to the purge, while others like Nikolaus had only lost one. He was clearly under the impression that his father had abandoned him, but that wasn’t true at all—Karstedt was already covering Nikolaus’s living expenses and would surely help with his winter preparations too, if asked.

“Might I suggest writing to him?” I said.

“I’m worried that he might refuse... Lady Elvira does not think fondly of me.”

That came as no surprise, considering everything that his mother, Trudeliède, had done. At the same time, though, Elvira was the kind of person to prioritize fairness even when her house was out of whack. My mother was amazing.

“Any reasonable request you put forward will surely be granted,” I assured him. “However, being ready for winter will not give you cause to skip the Harvest Festival. Pray sincerely so that you might obtain divine protections from the gods.”

“Of course. It’s been slow going so far, but I’m learning the prayers with my attendants. Just the other day, when Grandfather came to the temple to help us train, he told us to pray sincerely and secure more protections.”

I’d ended up missing him because I was brewing in my library, but Bonifatius had visited the temple to train the apprentices. During his time here, he had apparently praised Nikolaus as “a quality knight with a lot of promise.”

“Sister, could you send an ordonnanz of thanks to him? He was truly disappointed that you weren’t here.”

Wait, didn’t Matthias and the others make the same request of me before?

Matthias seemed to remember as well—it had happened around the time of the Gerlach investigation—and was now giving Nikolaus what I took to be a look of sympathy. Meanwhile, Judithe mumbled, “That’s why yesterday he...” There was a distant look in her eyes.

Did something happen between Judithe and Grandfather yesterday?

Confused, I returned to my room—whereupon Matthias

reminded me to contact Bonifatius.

“In fact, I think you should do it now,” Judithe said, holding out a yellow feystone for me.

I accepted the feystone, though I was so bewildered by this point that there might as well have been a gigantic question mark floating above my head. Matthias and Judithe carefully discussed what the message should be, then I said exactly what they told me to say.

“It was so amazing of you to remember your promise to me and train the apprentices, even though you don’t like going to the temple. Thank you so much. I love you!”

Bonifatius’s response came not even a moment later:

“I am your grandfather; it is only natural that I would keep a promise I made to you.”

He hadn’t said much at all, but Judithe and Matthias still exchanged satisfied nods and a firm handshake. Philine quietly informed me of the circumstances a little while later; when Bonifatius was in a bad mood, he became merciless in his training of the knights. The purpose of my ordonnanz had been to rescue Damuel and Cornelius, among so many others.

The apprentice blues due to participate in the Harvest Festival could be heard muttering prayers to themselves as they wandered the temple’s corridors. Even the blue priests were working harder than usual, feeling inspired now that full-fledged nobles were treating divine ceremonies so seriously.

I’d decided to meet with the apprentices over tea so that we could discuss what they would need to bring on their first trip and what they would need to do to prepare. I also took the opportunity to note how I ordered my robe to be adjustable based on my growth over the years.

“Nikolaus was the only one who could afford new ceremonial robes, thanks to his father’s support,” one shrine maiden muttered. “I, on the other hand, have no choice but to alter robes worn by a past apprentice.” It was apparently her first time needing to adjust clothes that hadn’t been passed down to her by a family member, and the pain in her voice was hard to miss. She couldn’t hide the anxiety she felt about having a very finite supply of money for the first time in her life.

“Still, it is better than losing our lives or spending our days in

the castle playroom,” another priest replied, “so I really am grateful to Lady Rozemyne and Aub Ehrenfest. At the same time, though... there are occasions when I can’t help but feel sad.”

I could understand why. Life in the temple was hard and solitary compared to a carefree life with one’s family.

“Indeed,” came a third voice. “I was always told that when I outgrow my clothes, I need only buy new ones. The idea of wearing one outfit for such a long time never occurred to me—though I suppose that is necessary here.”

“I expect you will all grow very quickly indeed,” I said, “and it would cost you far too much to buy new robes every year or so.” In the past, because minors hadn’t needed to participate in ceremonies, priests and shrine maidens had purchased robes only when they became adults. They had mostly finished growing by that point, so they wouldn’t need to buy new ones for years to come.

Of course, the same couldn’t be said of the young apprentices before me now.

“Lady Rozemyne,” one of the children said, “please tell us how to order clothes such that we can use them for years to come.”

It was time for me to break out my old alteration methods. I hadn’t sold the techniques to Corinna or anyone else, so I could easily have spread them on my own, but it seemed more beneficial to let the Gilberta Company reap the profits; the more I buttered them up now, the more cooperative they would be when I asked to move Tuuli to the Sovereignty.

I wrote a letter to Corinna, instructing her to sell my design for the ceremonial robes to the seamstresses working for the apprentice blues.

The summer baptism ceremony had concluded, and Sylvester’s departure for Ahrensbach was growing ever nearer, so I got Lasfam to send a brewing set and a magic tool packed with food to the castle.

We’d already finished making maximal-quality samples for Ferdinand to review, and I’d written a letter to accompany them. On the surface, it contained no more than some traditional seasonal greetings, a few words of sympathy for the funeral, a list of the ingredients that Sylvester would deliver, and a brief note that I would make more paper if our samples were good enough. But on

the back, written in invisible ink, was the process by which we had made our paper. In essence, it was a step-by-step recipe for creating maximal-quality feyplant paper, including the interim by-products we created along the way.

Ferdinand would surely want to experiment with the paper himself, being the mad scientist that he was, so I'd made sure to include several unmodified sheets of each kind. Assuming that he'd now received a workshop as per our agreement with the royals, he would doubtless find some time to play around with the paper on his own and then send word to me of any further improvements he managed to make.

Over dinner on the day before his departure, I made sure to give Sylvester some very clear instructions: "Be sure to confirm with your own eyes that Ferdinand was given a workshop. It was a promise between the king and an aub, so there's no reason it shouldn't have happened yet. If you find that Lady Detlinde and Lady Georgine have dragged their feet and defied what is nothing short of a royal decree, ensure they are punished accordingly."

They won't be allowed to drag this out!

Sylvester rolled his eyes at me and said, "I can see why Wilfried got sick of this." That wasn't going to stop me, though. This workshop had been one of the conditions for my adoption; the royal family not keeping their end of the bargain simply wouldn't fly with me.

"Oh, and ensure that the hidden room Ferdinand receives is a proper one—even if he tries to stop you!"

"Hm... That part could actually be somewhat fun..." Sylvester mused. I couldn't help but sigh in relief as his frustration gave way to a hint of enthusiasm.

Florencia smiled and stroked her growing belly as she listened to our back-and-forth. "There is no need to fret, Rozemyne; Sylvester will do his job. After all, this is one of the few occasions when he will get to check up on Lord Ferdinand."

I really hope so...

"Will you and Melchior be staying at the castle for now?" she asked.

"Yes. I intend to remain here for about three days so that I can supply the foundation. I cannot stay for any longer than that, as we need to prepare for the Starbind Ceremony." I would need to

harvest growy-stretchy trees with the orphans before *and* afterward, meaning I wouldn't have time to relax in the castle.

"We have made plans to have tea with her, Mother," Charlotte said.

"Oh? I do not recall receiving an invitation. Is this tea party only between you children?"

"Indeed. I am hosting a get-together for us alone."

Wilfried gave a confirming nod. Our plan was to clear the room of our retainers and then exchange intelligence.

"It's been so long since we've had a tea party together," Melchior said. "I can't wait. And that reminds me—I attended a tea party with the apprentice blues in the temple just the other day. I also toured the workshop where the orphans work. It was amazing to see books being made."

Everyone listened closely as Melchior eagerly told us about his experiences. Judging by the reactions of the attendants serving us, the temple was gradually becoming less of a taboo.

"Farewell and take care," I said to Sylvester and to Karstedt, who was resuming his usual position as the archduke's guard knight. There were so many adults gathered, no doubt because they were attending the funeral of a neighboring aub, but Florencia wasn't going to accompany them; her belly was now large enough that it wouldn't be safe for her to go on such a long trip. Instead, she would stay in Ehrenfest and do as much administrative work as she could without endangering herself.

After seeing them off, I returned to my chambers with my entire retinue; all of my retainers had accompanied me to today's send-off. Seeing them lined up was somehow nostalgic.

"It's been quite a while since I've seen you all together," I said, then let out a short laugh. "As I recall, the last time was when I announced my upcoming adoption and asked you all whether you would accompany me."

Judithe gritted her teeth, vexed. "You know, I nearly cried when I heard that Lieseleta was going."

"You *nearly* cried, did you?" Ottilie giggled. "I seem to remember you sobbing and wailing that she was 'a meanie and a traitor.' It really was something having to console you about being the only one left out when Brunhilde and I are staying behind too!"

In an instant, Judithe's face went bright red. She had apparently

calmed down after hearing that Philine would be staying behind until she came of age, and that offering her name now wouldn't even guarantee her a place by my side.

"I'm sorry to have upset you," I said, "but please know this: if you wish to follow me to the Sovereignty after coming of age, I will welcome you with open arms. Even if only for the short time before your parents decide on your engagement, it would warm my heart to have you beside me."

Elvira had advised me to be honest and up-front, so that was exactly what I was doing. Judithe responded only with a shy nod and an embarrassed smile.

I continued, "Philine is going to serve as the orphanage director until she comes of age. Please help train the apprentice blues whenever you visit her at the temple."

"As you wish."

The only one of my retainers who had yet to reach a decision was Damuel. I turned to look at him... and was instead met with Clarissa's beaming smile. She took a step toward me, looking as if she might burst into song at any moment.

"Yes, Clarissa...?"

"I've finally prepared my name-swearing stone! So, Lady Rozemyne... Please embrace my everything!"

I really don't want to.

.....

Gah.

This was the second name-swearing that had been forced down my throat. At the very least, when we performed the ritual, Clarissa didn't coo in delight as Hartmut had done; she winced at the pain like a normal person.

Wait, hold on... Nothing about Clarissa is normal. Don't be fooled, Rozemyne!

Kids' Tea Party

“And this is how my studies have progressed, Lady Rozemyne,” Clarissa said, showing me some of her recent work. “What do you think?” For the Archduke Conference, she had supported the archducal couple during their negotiations with Dunkelfelger, but now she was helping me.

Although it would only fully begin when I came of age, it was already set in stone that I’d start a new printing industry in the Sovereignty. This would potentially lead to my involvement in charitably establishing new workshops, depending on the state of the Sovereign temple’s orphanage and gray priests, and that was where Clarissa came in. She had collected all kinds of documents from when I’d established my workshop here in Ehrenfest—specifically documents from the nobles’ side of things—all so that I could begin my work in the Sovereignty as smoothly as possible.

Among the documents she had compiled were records of the negotiations Ferdinand had entered with nobles at the time and of the contracts they had signed. There were also lists of the shops that had gotten involved and the number of workers they employed. Clarissa was using this information alongside references to various exchanges between Dunkelfelger and the Sovereignty to work out how we should go about starting the new industry and which scholars from which government branches we would need to speak with.

“You have done well to research so much in this short time, Clarissa. I never knew that Ferdinand went to such great lengths while I was making a workshop in the orphanage.”

These documents made it clear how much Ferdinand had supported me while I was blazing ahead with Benno and the others. They also revealed my own shortsightedness. At the time, I’d thought it was annoying that Ferdinand wanted so many reports and expected meetings to be arranged so far in advance, but now I could see that it had all been extremely necessary.

“I can’t lose to Philine now that she’s due to become the

orphanage director and is being of such great use to you,” Clarissa said.

Philine spent the day doing handover work in the temple with Monika, as she did every day. In the process, Hartmut had performed a fealty ceremony to give her some blue robes. She was now a proper apprentice blue shrine maiden.

As for Roderick, under my instruction, he was using the requests we’d received from the Plantin and Gilberta Companies to write reports on what size stores they would need in the Sovereignty. He was also making lists of the tools that would need to be made for them, and calculating how many rooms they would need for their workers. He was keeping busy even during tea parties.

I checked with Gretia and Lieseleta to ensure that the preparations for our sibling tea party were complete, then entrusted Otilie with looking after my chambers while I was gone. Damuel would inform me once Wilfried and Melchior left their rooms, so I was just waiting to hear from him.

“Lady Rozemyne, Damuel sends word,” Angelica reported after momentarily leaving the room. “Lord Wilfried and Lord Melchior have departed.”

I gathered my attendants and guard knights, then likewise headed to Charlotte’s tea party.

“Everyone, clear the room,” Charlotte instructed once we had exchanged greetings, taken our seats, and witnessed that the tea and sweets were safe to consume.

Wilfried, Melchior, and I said the same to our retainers. Soon enough, we four archduke candidates were the only ones left.

Charlotte indicated an area-affecting sound-blocker and said, “We shall use this today.” But as she moved to activate it, I quickly spoke out in protest.

“Using that tool would put a disproportionately large burden on you, wouldn’t it? Should we not use individual ones?”

“No, Sister; this is ideal. Melchior may be too exhausted to use a personal magic tool for the duration of our gathering. I’ve heard that he regularly offers his mana at the temple.”

Excuse me?!

As it turned out, it wasn’t advisable for children who had yet to enter the Royal Academy to use personal sound-blockers; the

burden it would put on them was simply too great. That hadn't stopped Ferdinand, though. He had made me use them from the very start.

Ferdinand was never this considerate with me!

As I recalled, he had first made me use one during our meeting with Lutz's parents. That hadn't been a short discussion by any means. Not to mention, he had only thrust it at me in the first place as a way of shutting me up. I supposed that he had probably known enough about my mana quantity to gauge what was within my limits. And even if using the tool *had* made me sick, that likely wouldn't have bothered him; in his eyes, it would have been the perfect excuse to exclude me from the meeting altogether.

Curse you, Ferdinand!

As I angrily shook my fist at the past, I offered to activate the tool instead. "You should not shoulder this burden alone, Charlotte."

She gave me a cute glare with her indigo eyes. "You say that, but don't you always try to carry burdens on your own?"

I wanted to be a reliable elder sister on at least *some* occasions, so I slid off of my chair and gave the magic tool a swift chop, activating it before Charlotte even had the chance. Speed had brought me victory.

"I currently have no shortage of mana," I said, resuming my seat with my chest puffed out, "so please allow me to assist you at times like this. As it stands, you are supporting my socializing and your mother while I am doing nothing. Furthermore, for you to have prepared this much, you must want to discuss my move to the Sovereignty, right?"

A slight smile graced Charlotte's lips as she replied, "Sister, despite what you might believe, you are *always* helping me."

"That hardly seems true..."

"It is. When your engagement to Wilfried was decided, you asked Father to let me pick my future partner in return. Even now, when you are faced with this undesirable adoption, you are doing everything in your power to give me so many options for the future. How can I ever hope to repay you?"

Holy cow, we're starting off heavy! Would it be okay for me to respond that I just want her to say, "Sister, you're amazing! I respect you so much!" in a cute voice? No?

Charlotte looked so serious that I didn't know whether to give a

light response or seriously contemplate her predicament alongside her.

She continued, "It is because of you that we have not had to live as members of a bottom-ranking duchy. Speaking to those in their thirties and above has helped me to realize what a different world that would have been." Supporting Florencia, carrying out the duties of a first wife, and seeing the working nobles in the castle had shown her that there was a huge gap between the adults who knew only the methods of the bottom-ranking duchies, and the younger generation who had never even experienced it. "From what I can tell, Ehrenfest's shift in perspective began with those who attended the Royal Academy with Uncle."

Veronica had already cast Ferdinand aside by the time he enrolled at the Royal Academy, so his excellent grades and other achievements hadn't contributed much to Ehrenfest's overall ranking. They had, however, inspired many of his peers. Under his spartan leadership, our knights had managed to best Dunkelfelger at treasure-stealing ditter. And when he came first-in-class on the scholar course, our other scholars had started working even harder, believing that they could catch up to him with enough effort.

Ferdinand then graduated, and Damuel's contemporaries moved to the forefront. Thanks to the end of the civil war and the subsequent purge, Ehrenfest's place in the duchy rankings had risen entirely on its own. It was a period of great change, with blue priests attending the Academy to become nobles, professors being swapped out after so many were killed, and the curriculum morphing dramatically. That new generation had been the last to experience Ehrenfest's days at the very bottom of the rankings.

From there, Cornelius's generation had arrived. They had spent their first years at the Royal Academy being treated as members of a bottom-ranking duchy, despite Ehrenfest's sudden climb. Then, out of the blue, picture-book bibles and other learning materials had come on the market, and the winter playroom had been repurposed for education. Indeed, they had experienced Ehrenfest at its best *and* worst.

Then, Wilfried and I enrolled at the Royal Academy. Trends were set left and right, the Better Grades Committee prompted massive improvements in Ehrenfest's grades, and our rapid development caught the attention of the other duchies. Our dormitory began serving delicious food as a matter of course;

meanwhile, we received so many invitations to tea parties that we had to start filtering them. We were so popular during socializing season that even top-ranking duchies reached out to us.

Then came Charlotte's generation, who arrived at the Academy when our rise through the rankings was already in full swing. Everyone had stopped treating us like a bottom-ranking duchy by that point, so it made sense that they didn't understand the struggles of their elders.

"Other duchies chide us for not acting as a top-ranking duchy should," Charlotte said, "but a glance behind the curtain shows that our mindset is indeed changing. If not for your new adoption, Sister, I would only have needed to criticize those who thoughtlessly clung to the old methods..."

I was the person challenging and reshaping everyone's ideas of common sense, so Charlotte predicted that my departure would cause Ehrenfest to slip back down the rankings. She was probably right; our duchy was dominated by adults who subscribed to the old mindset, and there were plenty among the archducal family and their retainers who had yet to adopt our new way of thinking. Those who remained in Ehrenfest would need to do *something* to stop all of our progress from being undone.

Charlotte sighed. "We must protect what you have given us while at the same time shrugging off any interference from the adults. I really do wish to repay your kindness, and the only way I can think to do that is by ensuring that you don't become embarrassed by your home after joining the royal family."

In my absence, the archducal family would continue going to the temple in hope of dismantling its negative reputation, while also performing religious ceremonies to gain divine protections. Thanks to the benefits of prayer, there would eventually come a time when they could speak proudly of my temple upbringing.

Charlotte also had several plans of her own. She would develop the printing industry and send me new books, carefully oversee the Italian restaurant's chefs as part of a plan to make Ehrenfest a duchy overflowing with delicious food, ensure that the playroom remained a place of education, and maintain the Better Grades Committee so that our duchy's grades wouldn't fall. In short, she would protect the fruits of my labor while continuing to change the duchy's mindset.

"That is what I can do," Charlotte concluded with a smile.

A pleasant warmth spread through my chest. She really cared about protecting the results of my hard work, and that realization brought a smile to my face as well.

“I should warn you, though, Sister—I am ill-suited for coming up with bold new ways to develop the duchy or incorporating things of my own invention. My strengths lie in a more supportive role. Thus, I shall do my best to coordinate the chaos while protecting and standardizing the framework you have made.”

Charlotte’s evaluation sounded very objective in nature. She did often support others from behind the scenes, and she displayed immense talent in the areas she had described. Bringing together opposing forces and making them work toward one goal was no easy feat.

“Because my aim is to preserve the systems you have put in place,” she continued, “I think I am the best candidate to become our duchy’s next aub. In time, Melchior and our new younger sibling might become better suited than I, depending on the skills they develop... but until then, I shall hold the fort and assist them where I can. Will you support me in this, Sister?”

After listening to Charlotte identify her strengths and weaknesses, I nodded meekly. “Ehrenfest’s adults are quite vocal in their hatred of change, so I wasn’t very confident in my reforms. It makes me glad to hear that you wish to keep them. I will support your choice, Charlotte, but... will you really stay here, even though you would make such a capable first wife in a top-ranking duchy?”

Serving as an interim aub was anything but easy—she would be harshly criticized by the more conservative nobles, she needed to be careful with her choice of husband, and the mountain of tedious work that came with the position would surely make her want to quit. Plus, now that Wilfried was no longer guaranteed to become the next archduke, there was a good chance that the Leisengangs would start obsessing over Brunhilde’s child, if she ended up having one.

“As nobody from Ehrenfest can marry outside the duchy for the next five years, our population will gradually include more and more people from other duchies,” Charlotte said. “I would use the methods and perspectives of these individuals to fight against the Leisengangs and prove that *they* are in the wrong.”

The Leisengangs had the loudest voice now that the former Veronica faction was gone, but Charlotte wanted to quiet them

down and gradually change the dominant perspective in Ehrenfest. Her decision to remain an archduke candidate and take a groom from another duchy would apparently benefit all generations moving forward.

“Furthermore,” she continued, “due to the contract I signed to learn mana compression, I cannot risk doing anything that might make me your enemy. Taking a husband and staying in Ehrenfest is therefore ideal. Far from being opposed to you, I shall turn the duchy into your shield once the king has adopted you. Yes, I could marry elsewhere, but I do not know what position that would put me in. The civil war might seem like distant history to us, but it only happened two decades ago.”

A shiver ran down my spine. I was surprised that Charlotte had brought up the mana compression contract—even more so that it was binding her to Ehrenfest. That hadn’t been my intention at all.

As I put my head in my hands, cursing my own shortsightedness, Charlotte gave me a troubled smile. There was kindness in her eyes as she said, “Please do not think you are to blame; I chose to sign that contract after weighing up my options. Just know that no matter your situation—no matter the status of your adoption, new or old—I will always be your ally.”

Her words were so touching that I wanted to cry.

Wilfried nodded, having been quietly listening to our exchange. “You’ve done so much for Ehrenfest, Rozemyne, but there’s almost nothing it can do for you in return before you leave for the Sovereignty. We’re the weakest shield you could ask for, but, well... you can at least rest easy knowing that your allies here will support you no matter what.”

“You’re going to support me as well, Wilfried...?” I asked, going out of my way to confirm that I understood.

He scoffed. “Given how you’re treating Uncle even now that he’s moved, it’s clear that you won’t suddenly lord your royal status over Ehrenfest. Though you’ll probably dump plenty of trouble on us.”

“Oh my... Is that not a tad offensive? I still worry about Ferdinand even now that he has moved to Ahrensbach, but I certainly haven’t *dumped trouble on him*, as you put it.” I was working so hard to be useful, and this was the thanks I got? How rude.

Wilfried shook his head, exasperated, then pointed a finger at

me. “You’re the only one who thinks that. Sorry to say this, but you’re wrong.”

“No, dear brother—you are wrong. I am striving to cause not even a single problem for Ferdinand.”

“Then you’ve been going about it in all the wrong ways, don’t you think?”

Charlotte and Melchior merely burst into laughter. Neither one of them came to my defense.

Ngh... Th-That’s fine...

“Speaking of misdirected effort, is it even worth trying to hide the fact you’re leaving?”

“What do you mean?”

“There are rumors of your move to the Sovereignty all over the place.”

“What?!”

As it turned out, there were plenty of reasons that people thought I was going to move. During the Archduke Conference, many had argued that I should be made the Sovereign High Bishop—then, to further stoke the flames of suspicion, our archducal couple had received an unexpected summons from the royal family. Even more unusual were their decision to hold a meeting without retainers after the initial refusal, the private discussion that had taken place after the post-conference review, and the acceleration of the temple handover. It was easy to assume that I’d been ordered to become the Sovereign High Bishop.

“I wasn’t told all that much about what happened during the conference, so imagine my surprise when the rumors reached me. It made me wonder, though...” He gave me a look of genuine concern. “Are you really going to be made the Sovereign High Bishop after your adoption...? I’ve heard about the temples of other duchies during tea parties, and they aren’t anything like the one in Ehrenfest.”

I shook my head. “I might tour the Sovereign temple on occasion, but I doubt I will ever become its High Bishop. I was very clear with Prince Sigiswald that if the royal family attempts to give me such duties, they will need to start performing them as well.”

Wilfried exchanged a look with Charlotte before staring at me, suddenly overcome with fear. “D-Don’t tell me you... gave Prince Sigiswald orders before you’ve even been adopted...”

I nodded, and immediately he groaned that my antics were why

he didn't like dealing with me. Meanwhile, Charlotte's eyes wandered around the room. She spent a long while trying to find the right words, then eventually said that she was glad my adoption was coming so soon. Her main concern was that my outbursts might be misconstrued as treason.

"Was it really that disrespectful...?" I asked. "Here in Ehrenfest, the aub and the rest of the archducal family have agreed to visit the temple and perform religious ceremonies, so it seemed reasonable enough to me. I merely said that they should get a healthy royal to serve as the High Bishop instead of thrusting such duties upon someone as sickly as I. Was that so wrong of me?"

"No normal noble would say that!"

"Prince Sigiswald certainly was surprised. I don't regret saying it, though; he wouldn't have understood any of my intentions otherwise."

His shoulders slumped, Wilfried offered a few words of sympathy for Prince Sigiswald, who would eventually be engaged to me. I shot him a stern glare, not at all sure what the problem was, while he turned to Melchior and stressed that I was a *terrible* example to follow when it came to socializing.

"You can consider her a role model for studying and religious ceremonies, but *never* use her as your basis for socializing or common sense. Not even Uncle could sort her out, so we don't stand a chance. In short, everyone has their own strengths and weaknesses, but you should only strive to mimic the former. Got it?"

Melchior nodded, taking the advice very seriously. "Rozemyne is exceptional, but I see she has her weaknesses too. That's a relief. It was starting to upset me that I can't yet manage all the things she does so easily."

"It's okay to let Rozemyne inspire you, but don't worry about trying to keep up with her. If you start doing that, then you're just going to fall short and feel miserable all the time."

"Indeed," Charlotte added. "I once lost my confidence as an archduke candidate after I was unable to do things exactly as Rozemyne did them. This is a path that we siblings must all tread."

Melchior let out a pleased sigh, looking as if a huge weight had just been lifted from his shoulders. "So I'm not the only one..." He had come to a mutual understanding of sorts with our siblings... which actually frustrated me a little.

“Please don’t leave me out,” I said.

“How could we not? You don’t understand the pain and suffering that comes with having an abnormal, extraordinary sibling.”

“I was stuck with an abnormal, extraordinary mentor! I’ve struggled too! Include me!”

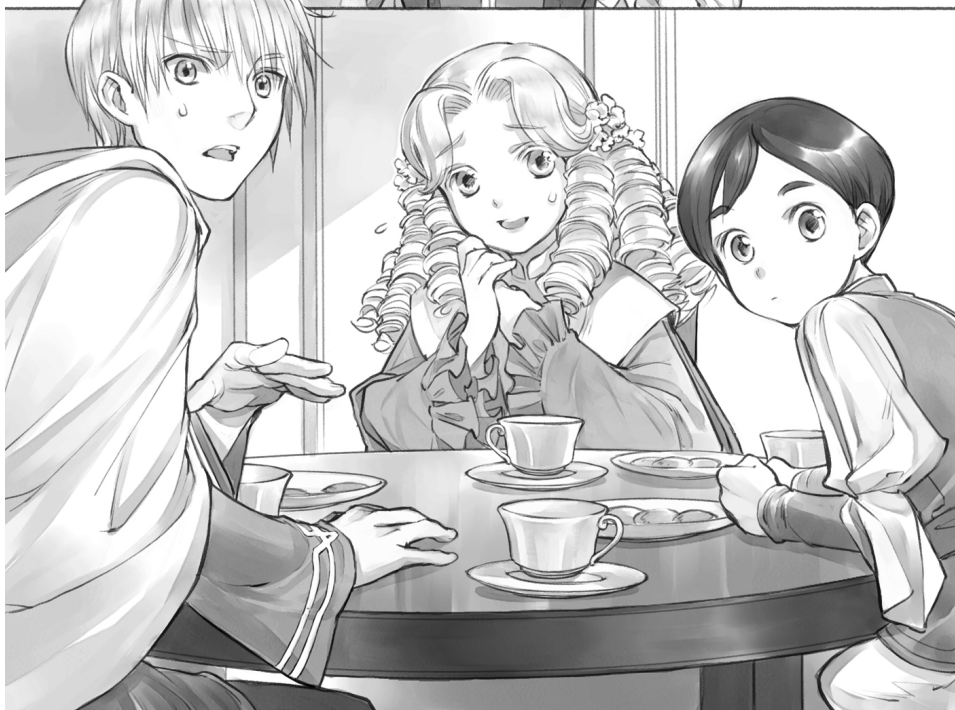
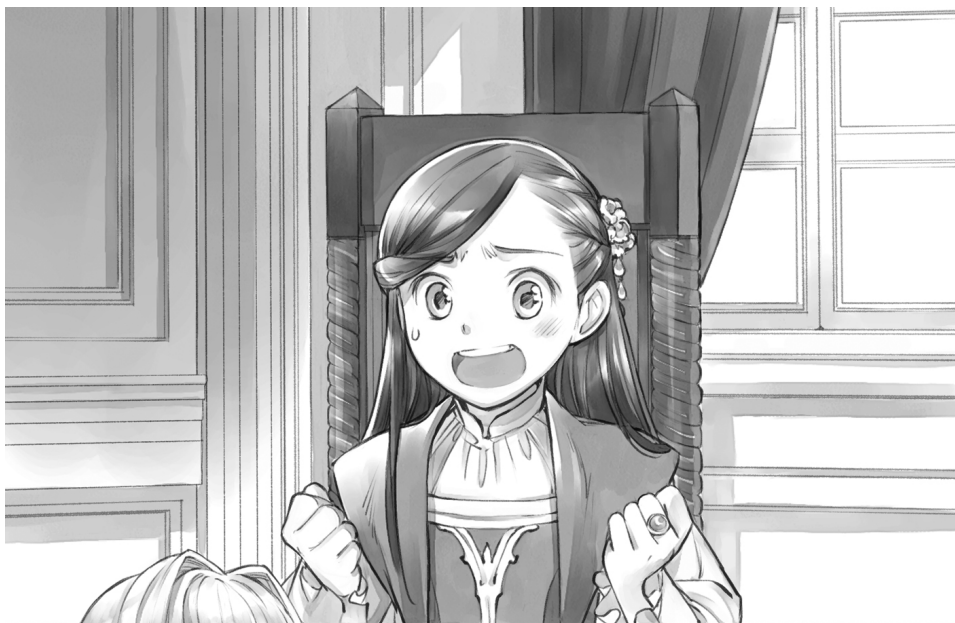
Wilfried and Charlotte exchanged glances. Then...

“You and Uncle seem like birds of a feather to me,” Wilfried remarked. “You’re both weird.”

“That’s right, Sister,” Charlotte agreed. “You were able to complete his grueling lessons without breaking a sweat. Did you ever succumb to the pressure and fail, by chance?”

Melchior then finished me off with a very unhelpful, “You’re not being left out. You and Uncle are weird together.”

I want to be included with my siblings, not the family weirdo!



As I despaired, an ordonnanz flew into the room. We each held out an arm so that it wouldn't land on the table or our sweets, and it perched on mine.

"This is Hartmut. The Leisegang elders are storming the castle, demanding to know if you are being sent to the Sovereignty. They might have deliberately waited until the aub was out of the picture. Lady Florencia will need to face them alone, which won't be good for her... prenatal care, was it? As I'm sure you've gathered, this is a cause for concern."

The bird repeated its message two more times before turning back into a yellow feystone.

"They would antagonize Mother as soon as Father's gone?" Wilfried muttered, staring intently at the stone. Sylvester's retinue had passed through Leisegang to break on their way to Ahrensbach, so the elders were acting in knowledge of his absence.

I took out my schtappe, tapped the feystone, and spoke the chant to turn it back into an ordonnanz. "Hartmut, find out who told the Leisengangs about what occurred during the Archduke Conference. Someone must be inciting them."

I swung my schtappe, and the white bird disappeared through the wall on its way to Hartmut. Wilfried watched it go, then stood up with a clatter.

"I'm going to help Mother."

"As am I," I said, sliding off of my chair. "We shall deal with them together. The Leisegang elders won't be a good influence on her unborn child, that's for certain."

Wilfried nodded, then turned to Charlotte and Melchior.

"Charlotte, Melchior, take Mother to a side room and keep her away from the Leisengangs. Rozemyne and I will fight them off."

"Are you certain, Brother...?" Charlotte asked anxiously. "Have you not already had so many terrible experiences with them? Furthermore, considering how we will need to handle them moving forward..."

He patted her on the shoulder. "I'm not the next aub anymore. I don't need their support, which means I don't have to take their blows lying down. I'll stand squarely in the firing line while you wait for the right opportunity to pounce on Giebe Leisegang and get him on your side. That's what you're good at, isn't it?"

“Brother...”

With that, I turned off the sound-blocker, and we summoned our retainers. They all wanted to know what the incident was, so we told them about the arrival of the Leisegang elders.

“Leonore,” I said, “please inform Mother, Grandfather, and Giebe Leisegang of this development. And Angelica... gather all of the guard knights serving archduke candidates.”

“Understood!”

In an instant, our retainers had gone from waiting outside to busily assembling.

Charlotte and Melchior let out quiet gasps at the sudden intensity of our guard knights. Wilfried was unfazed, though; he told them to follow us, then offered me his hand and said, “Let’s go, Rozemyne. We’re not gonna let them run amok while Father’s gone.”

“That’s right,” I replied, taking his hand with a smile. “The purge might have eliminated their political opposition, but they’ve gotten a little too cocksure, if you ask me. Let’s use this opportunity to knock them down a peg. For all of our sakes.”

“It’s about time they learned that their ‘princess’ is the scariest monster of all.”

“And what is *that* supposed to mean?!”

The Leisegang Elders

Despite enthusiastically bursting out of Charlotte's room, I couldn't keep up with Wilfried on foot. I got into my highbeast, and together we headed to the main building.

"Come on, Rozemyne," he said from ahead of me.

As I was trying to match his pace, I suddenly noticed something strange—his retainers weren't in their usual positions. Lamprecht had always stayed right beside his lord, but now he was nearer the back of the group. Meanwhile, Barthold was fairly close to Wilfried. Had the name-swearing earned him that much trust?

I contemplated the odd sight as we headed to the castle's parlor; according to Hartmut, that was where we were going to find the Leisegangs. Upon our arrival, I saw that one of Florencia's guard knights was stationed outside the room. I confirmed that the rumors of a disturbance were true, then asked that we be allowed inside. The knight responded with a look of concern—a gaggle of archduke candidates and their retainers requesting access to a private meeting was far from ideal—but went inside to check nonetheless.

"Everyone, what are you doing here?" Leberecht asked as he came out to meet us. He was Hartmut's father, and was apparently attending the meeting as Florencia's scholar.

Wilfried stepped forward without a moment's hesitation. "The Leisegangs are here, aren't they? Let us inside. We can't have Mother negotiate on her own."

"Please, Leberecht," I added. "Their discussion is about me, is it not?"

He gave us a reluctant look, then returned to the meeting room to obtain his lady's permission. We were allowed inside a mere moment later, whereupon we found Florencia, her retainers, and several Leisegang elders sitting down together. I'd encountered the elders during feasts and the like, but this was my first time seeing them in a private setting.

"Ooh, Lady Rozemyne?!" they exclaimed.

"Everyone, what are you doing here?" I asked.

"We are discussing a matter of the utmost importance to the future of our duchy. You are the shining hope of the Leisegangs, Lady Rozemyne; the very idea that you might be reduced to serving as the Sovereign High Bishop is preposterous! Just what is Aub Ehrenfest thinking?!"

The elders were being so flagrantly arrogant that their decision to suddenly force their way into the castle no longer surprised me.

Florencia sighed. "As I said to you, any matters concerning the future of our duchy must be discussed with Aub Ehrenfest. Please await his return so that you can speak with him directly."

In other words: leave already.

The elders shook their heads. "We must ensure that you understand our position as well, Lady Florencia. Only the first wife can save an aub whose sight has been blinded by Verbergen—or are you also a slave to your love for your own children?" They sighed. "That side of him resembles Lady Veronica all too well."

They were outright declaring that Sylvester was letting his judgment be clouded and that he needed to be set back on the right path. Of course, it was all just a veiled attempt to make me the next aub so that I wouldn't be taken as the Sovereign High Bishop.

"I do not believe Verbergen is gracing the archducal family with his presence," Florencia said.

The elders nodded with smiles. "In which case, you must understand that Lady Rozemyne cannot be allowed to leave Ehrenfest. If a royal decree requires an archduke candidate capable of performing religious ceremonies to be moved to the Sovereign temple, then we have others who can go in her place. It should only require a bit of... negotiation."

They turned their smiles on Wilfried. As the grandson of a criminal who had committed a crime of his own, he was better suited to being sent to a temple. They were also indirectly referencing how he had gone to Leisegang wearing blue robes for Spring Prayer.

In response, Wilfried just pressed his lips together.

This must be how they mocked him when he went to Leisegang.

Seeing this exchange made me understand why Wilfried would get so depressed about people continuously dredging up a mistake he'd made as a young child. It also made me want to sigh at how the older generation continued to look down on the temple.

"Dear mother, please leave the room," I said to Florencia. "It

cannot be good for the baby to hear such hurtful words.”

“Indeed, Mother. Let us go,” Charlotte added. She moved to take Florencia by the hand, only to be refused with a peaceful smile.

“No, I shall stay here,” Florencia declared. “Your concerns warm my heart, but I cannot leave my children alone in an environment such as this.”

Together with Wilfried, I stood protectively in front of Florencia and faced down the Leisegang elders. “I find myself at a complete loss, as I cannot comprehend what brings you here,” I said to them. “There are no plans for me to be sent to the Sovereign temple. What has inspired such rumors?”

“We have our own information network, Lady Rozemyne, and everyone who attended the Archduke Conference corroborates our fear.”

Only a restricted number of nobles could attend the Archduke Conference in the first place, and the fact that my adoption hadn’t been leaked made the list of potential culprits even shorter. One thing in particular stood out to me, though: they were speaking as if they had concrete evidence that I was being made the Sovereign High Bishop.

“Royal decree or not,” the elders continued, “we are highly concerned about leaving Ehrenfest’s future in the hands of an aub who does not understand what his duchy needs and someone like Lord Wilfried, who makes promises that he cannot hope to keep. We want *you* to lead instead, Lady Rozemyne.”

Still, the elders were pushing for Wilfried to enter the Sovereign temple in my stead. Before they could say anything else, however, Bonifatius burst into the room.

“Rozemyne, are you safe?!”

“Ooh, Lord Bonifatius! Excellent timing!”

The elders looked at Bonifatius with bright eyes and asked for his assistance with keeping me in Ehrenfest. He frowned at them in response. I could tell that he wanted to cooperate with them—and he probably would have, were he not already aware of my new adoption.

In any case, it looks like it wasn’t Grandfather who lit a fire under them...

The elders then repeated that it was unreasonable to send me to the Sovereign temple, since I was better suited to becoming the next

aub than any other archduke candidate. For obvious reasons, this took Bonifatius by surprise.

"There has been zero indication that Rozemyne is moving to the Sovereign temple," he said. "Who told you otherwise?"

"All those who attended the Archduke Conference. Were you not aware?"

"I was not."

As the elders exchanged worried glances, Wilfried stared at them all in exasperation. "There are no plans for Rozemyne to join the Sovereign temple. It seems to me that someone is trying to trick you all."

Their expressions darkened; Wilfried was the last person they wanted to hear that from. Then they began mocking him with noble euphemisms.

Hold on... Maybe this is what happened during Spring Prayer. Wilfried must have accidentally taunted them.

Had the remark come from Bonifatius or me, the Leisegang elders wouldn't have gotten so infuriated, but from Wilfried... It seemed that he was just as bad at reading the room as I was. The elders continued their tirade, even going so far as listing Veronica's past sins, while Wilfried merely endured it.

Wilfried, I think you're even less suited for socializing than I am...

"I can sympathize with your position," I said to the elders, interjecting. "Nobody can deny that the Leisengangs have endured much hardship, or that Wilfried has been careless in the past."

The elders gazed at me with hope in their eyes, while Wilfried simply looked wounded.

"However," I continued, "I expect you made similar remarks to Wilfried when he visited Leisegang during Spring Prayer—to enrich both your land and Ehrenfest, might I add."

"Lady Rozemyne...?"

"You accuse him of being naive, but I think you are being shortsighted," I said with a smile, causing Wilfried and the elders to blink at me in surprise. "You believe I am being sent to the Sovereign temple, correct? Who do you think will perform Ehrenfest's ceremonies once I am gone?"

I glanced at Wilfried, who grinned in response before turning to the elders. "After Rozemyne comes of age, Melchior will take over as the High Bishop. But if she leaves now, as you believe she might, my main pillar of support will vanish... making *me* the most suitable

candidate for joining the temple.”

“Indeed,” I continued with a threatening smile. “And you were treated so poorly when you visited Leisegang for Spring Prayer. Nobody would blame you for assuming that the Leisengangs no longer wish to take part in religious ceremonies. One would think that, as the duchy’s breadbasket, they would recognize the importance of Spring Prayer... but apparently not.”

“Please be aware that Ehrenfest cannot function without Leisegang’s crops,” the elders countered. “If our harvest suffers, so, too, will the duchy.”

The Leisengangs were only able to be so cocky because their position as the duchy’s breadbasket more or less guaranteed them a permanent role as landowners. Depriving them of religious ceremonies would deal an enormous blow to that security.

My smile broadened. “Yes, that was true once. But you would do well to remember that religious ceremonies have greatly amplified the harvests of *all* provinces, even Haldenzel. Of late, Ehrenfest has also been actively trading with other duchies. Let it be known that importing goods is now far easier than it was before.”

In the past, Ehrenfest had seldom engaged with other duchies—but times were changing. Going forward, we would be able to import food in exchange for hair ornaments and paper. I made sure to stress that the Leisengangs’ influence could easily be whittled away as a result, and that such a decision could be made independently by the aub.

The elders paled; they had only ever known Ehrenfest as a backwater duchy that received no attention from anyone. “Lady Rozemyne,” they cried, “how could you say that as our radiant star of hope?! Do you mean to turn your back on your greatest support base?!”

“Turn my back on you? Goodness. I am Ehrenfest’s High Bishop and the archduke’s adopted daughter; it should be obvious that I would not want those who belittle religious ceremonies, berate my siblings, and disrespect the aub among my support base.” I placed a hand on my cheek. “Besides, how many times must I remind you that I do not wish to become the next aub?”

The elders gawked at me in disbelief. At last, they appeared to understand my intentions.

Bonifatius looked between the elders and me. “Rozemyne, don’t

you think that's going too far?" he asked, trying to smooth things over.

"Not at all, Grandfather. The Leisegangs wanted the aub to lower our duchy's rank, did they not? They were willing to cast aside the fruits of my and everyone else's hard work at the Royal Academy." I mimicked Angelica's classic sorrowful expression and said, "It was as if everyone had betrayed me."

Bonifatius grunted, having attended that meeting as a Leisegang representative. "Still, not performing any ceremonies in Leisegang would be..."

"Fear not," Wilfried interjected with a smile, slicing through the tense atmosphere of the room. He turned to the elders and said, "If you find yourselves at a loss, then you could just join the temple. It really is worth considering. By performing the rituals yourselves, you could ensure that your harvests remain as bountiful as you are used to. Your precious star of hope has been performing them for Ehrenfest's sake, so consider this an opportunity to support her. Retired or not, you still have mana, so why would you not?"

Once again, he's failed to read the room... But he isn't wrong.

"Wilfried and Charlotte began religious ceremonies to cover for my absence," I said, "and they continue to assist me even now. It may be wise to ask my support base to follow their example and perform religious ceremonies as well."

The elders had retired and withdrawn from socializing. If they sympathized with my having to return from the Royal Academy alone for the Dedication Ritual, then their help would be greatly appreciated. Of course, they actually received the suggestion with very clear grimaces.

"Your assistance would be immediately helpful when I start attending the Royal Academy as well," Melchior exclaimed with glee.

"We of Leisegang have caused you so much trouble over mere rumors," Giebe Leisegang said, apologizing the moment he arrived. By that point, the elders had devolved into quiet sadness from listening to me expound my total disinterest in becoming the aub and from the amount of grief they had caused me. "Although they acted with such rudeness, their words and deeds all come out of concern for you, Lady Rozemyne. Please forgive them with magnanimity."

Giebe Leisegang began to flatly describe how the Leisegangs' situation had improved since Veronica's downfall and my adoption. They'd seen better harvests, the revival of the spring-summoning ceremony, the introduction of printing and paper-making workshops, an increase in divine protections, my mana compression method, and a bunch of other things that hadn't even occurred to me.

He continued, "Upon hearing that a member of our family who has blessed us so dearly was not just being denied the role of aub but was also being sent to the Sovereign temple like some common pest, our elders, who have suffered so much themselves, felt compelled to act."

The elders had not wanted me to face the same cruelty they had endured, so they had sprung into action the moment they heard that I was being sent to the Sovereign temple by royal decree.

"You are capable of empathizing with Lord Wilfried," he said. "I can only hope you would extend the same kindness to those who worry that you might be abused or forced out of noble society and into the temple as Lord Ferdinand once was."

I nodded at Giebe Leisegang and said, "Indeed." Their methods were extreme, and they had always seemed to be bothering me, but it was most likely true that the Leisegang elders were acting out of concern for me.

"Rozemyne is a kind girl," Florencia said, smiling at the giebe. "I believe she would have been far more empathetic with the Leisegangs had they not stormed the castle without warning. She came here only out of concern for me and was in fact participating in an unrelated tea party when she received the news. Thus, this is a discussion and nothing more. She is not truly planning to exclude Leisegang from religious ceremonies. Isn't that right, Rozemyne?"

I was still annoyed at the Leisegangs for asking for our rank to be lowered and also looking down on Sylvester after the purge of the former Veronica faction, but I nodded. "Indeed. As long as they start supporting the aub who cast aside his own faction for the benefit of the duchy, I am sure my thoughts will change." Leisegang would support Sylvester more in return for continued involvement in our religious ceremonies.

"Giebe Leisegang—if you agree to Rozemyne's request and support my husband more, I will turn a blind eye to this incident. You are fortunate that, because he is not present, only those of us in

this room are aware that this visit was unannounced.”

“You have my gratitude, Lady Florencia.”

Florencia had managed to wrap this situation up nicely. In truth, after hearing the giebe explain just how much they worried about me, I was glad to know that the elders wouldn't receive a harsh punishment. I supposed that the conversation was over, but then I noticed that Giebe Leisegang was inspecting Wilfried closely.

“Lord Wilfried,” he said in a low voice, “have you ever paused to consider what Lady Veronica did to the Leisengangs to make them resent you as passionately as they do?”

Wilfried narrowed his eyes a little, no doubt surprised to have received a genuine question instead of more veiled mockery.

The giebe continued, “It seems to me that you do not fully understand, despite the explanations you have received from the aub and your retainers. As a child, you enjoyed the benefits of the faction that Lady Veronica constructed more than anyone. You would do well to reflect on her actions and how third parties see you.”

Having pointed out that Wilfried was accidentally antagonizing the Leisengangs with his lack of knowledge, Giebe Leisegang took his leave with the elders in tow.

Wilfried just stared at his feet, deep in thought.

Days later, I returned to the temple. Hartmut had requested a private discussion with me, so I'd made sure to bring sound-blockers.

“I have found out who riled the Leisegang elders,” Hartmut announced, looking a tad exhausted. “It would seem that several people were responsible, and discovering them was no easy task. First was Barthold, who is name-sworn to Lord Wilfried.”

“Excuse me?”

“He has been taking advantage of the trust placed in him to ply his lord with lies, set him impossible tasks which he claims are from the Leisengangs, and pit his fellow retainers against one another. On top of that, he has been doing everything in his power to prevent you and the other archduke candidates from getting together to exchange information.”

My face twitched. Wilfried was being betrayed by his name-sworn?

Hartmut continued, “Barthold cannot disobey orders, but that

does not make him incapable of betrayal. The distinction is... complicated.” Indeed, it was up to a lord or lady to decide how they used their name-sworn. “The main takeaway is that Barthold intensely loathes his lord and the aub, for they betrayed their faction despite having been raised by Lady Veronica.”

“So...”

“It was Lady Florencia who first noticed the sudden change in Lord Wilfried’s environment and came across Barthold’s suspicious behavior. She decided to use the aub’s absence to put the disruptive retainer back in his place and shave down the Leisegangs’ influence.”

“Wait, *Florencia* did that?!” I exclaimed, wide-eyed. The idea hadn’t even crossed my mind.

“She instigated Barthold and hinted at the Sovereign temple’s actions, among other things, to rile the elders. Her intention was to stir the pot even more during their meeting so that she could have the Knight’s Order imprison them, thereby reducing the Leisegangs’ power.”

She had even scheduled their meeting for when we were going to be in the northern building for our tea party. It really had been an airtight scheme—well, before Hartmut had noticed the elders’ arrival.

“As I understand it, my father was the one who devised the plan,” he explained, then sighed. “It did occur to me that these devious tricks felt strangely familiar.”

In short, evil geniuses were bound to deceive one another. Hartmut had gone to Leberecht with evidence and testimonies in a hard-fought battle to wring the truth from him.

“As it turned out,” he continued, “they had intended to wound the Leisegangs more severely than they actually did in the end. Father said that your involvement caused things to settle down quite peacefully.”

“That’s nice, but... I’m still shocked to hear that Florencia was scheming. I can’t believe it.” She always wore such a calm, peaceful smile, so this revelation had taken me by complete surprise.

“The elders are easy to manipulate now that the purge has made them the duchy’s greatest power. I expect Lady Florencia wishes to curb their influence significantly before Brunhilde becomes the second wife. She cannot borrow Lady Elvira’s strength, after all.”

My face clouded over; I didn't care for noble nonsense in the slightest. I'd rushed out of our tea party out of concern for Florencia, worried that she was having to deal with the Leisegangs while pregnant... but now I just felt stupid.

"What's going to happen to Barthold?" I asked. He was plotting the downfall of someone to whom he was sworn, so I couldn't suppress my curiosity.

"That is for Lord Wilfried to decide. Lady Florencia intends to keep an eye on the unruly retainer and drop hints of his misdeeds until the young lord figures out the truth for himself. Father was quite strict in ordering me not to get involved, since this is a matter of education. And might I add, he scolded me harshly for allowing you to rush into danger."

Anytime something seemed strange, it was usually because someone was pulling strings from behind the scenes. One risked exposing their lord or lady to danger unless they could deduce exactly what was going on.

"I still have much to learn," Hartmut concluded. He was greatly troubled that his ordonnanz had caused me to abandon my tea party and take on the Leisegang elders. More than that, though, he hated that only the archducal family had benefited. On a personal level, we had gained nothing from the endeavor, and that was getting him down.

"If not for you," I said, "I would never have understood the circumstances behind this incident. You did well. Let us drink tea and enjoy some delicious sweets."

Sylvester Returns

I spent my days working on the handovers for the temple and the printing industry while reviewing Royal Academy coursework and observing the orphanage's studies. The children with magic tools who were old enough to be baptized this winter were going to meet with Sylvester in the autumn so that he could determine whether they were worthy of becoming nobles under his guardianship. As a result, they were now intensely focused on their education, making sure there was nothing wrong with how they carried themselves. Melchior and the apprentice blue priests were approaching their duties with equal fervor as the Harvest Festival approached.

Dirk had now obtained a magic tool and was desperately chugging the potions that Roderick and Philine were making in an attempt to accumulate more mana. He wouldn't need to enroll at the Royal Academy for another three years, but he wanted to get as much of a head start as he could.

As I continued my work, an ordonnanz arrived from Otilie in the castle. Sylvester and his retinue were about to arrive back from the funeral in Ahrensbach.

"It would seem that Lord Ferdinand sent all sorts of gifts," she continued. "You are wanted back at the castle today for dinner."

So I returned to the castle with Melchior and our retainers. The mention of gifts had made me really excited; maybe there was a time-stopping magic tool packed with delicious fish among them.

"Welcome back," we said to Sylvester as he alighted with Karstedt.

Once everyone was on their feet, the servants began unloading the luggage. The retainers' carriages were arriving behind them, along with many more packed with nothing but luggage. They had departed with a ton of stuff and returned with just as much.

In fact, they're using extra carriages, so they must have even more than they left with.

"You certainly brought a lot back with you," I remarked to

Sylvester. "You must have as much luggage as Ferdinand when he departed for Ahrensbach."

He looked down at me with a grimace. "And whose fault is that? Do the two of you think I'm some kind of luggage servant?"

I certainly didn't. The most I'd done was ask him to deliver the items Ferdinand requested, which meant there was only one culprit to speak of.

"Ah, I see. *Ferdinand* is to blame. It must be tough having such a demanding little brother."

I was trying to praise Sylvester, but he gave me a swift chop beneath the cover of his long sleeves. How bizarre.

"You sent him something ridiculous, apparently. He put his head in his hands and said that the available ingredients wouldn't be enough."

"Something ridiculous?" I echoed. "What was he referring to?"

"How am I supposed to know? Anyway, the last three carriages are for you. We're going to discuss Ahrensbach over dinner, so check them out and put the contents away before then."

With that, Sylvester started shooing me away. I couldn't help but blink in surprise as I gazed between him and the carriages. There were five packed with luggage... and three of those were for me?

"Lady Rozemyne, there is not much time before dinner," Otilie informed me. "Let us hurry."

She summoned Gretia and Liesele before heading over to the carriages. I would need to sort through all three, but my motivation vanished the moment I saw the first one.

"There are plates, bowls, and pots," I observed. "They've already been cleaned with waschen, so send them to the temple. Oh, but some of these might be from the food that Mother prepared for the Interduchy Tournament. I wonder which ones are hers..."

I never cooked, so I wouldn't know without asking the chefs. That they were all empty at least meant he had eaten, but sorting through them was going to be even more of a chore than expected.

"Might I suggest sending them to the temple kitchen for Ella and Hugo to sort through?" Philine said. "Perhaps we could even fill them with new sweets and dishes when we return them to Lady Elvira."

"Yes, that will do," I replied, then instructed that the pots and dishes be loaded onto a separate carriage to be sent to the temple.

“And over there... Is that Ahrensbach cloth?”

It must have been hot in Ahrensbach, as there were boxes filled with especially thin cloth. Gretia spread one piece out, then stared at it quizzically.

“It certainly is thin,” she mused aloud. “I suppose we could only use it here during the hottest part of summer.”

“Layering it over other cloth should allow for the creation of many new designs,” I said. “Perhaps we should send a piece to Aurelia.” We had similar tastes—at least according to Brunhilde—so maybe she would use the cloth to make summer clothing for her son, Siegrecht.

Ottilie nodded, then addressed the servants: “Gifts of cloth are meant to be distributed among one’s associates, so take it all to Lady Rozemyne’s room. Cloth from another duchy is particularly rare and will doubtless bring much joy to its recipients. We must carefully consider to whom we distribute it.”

She clearly had the cloth under control, so I moved on to another box. This one was full of time-stopping magic tools.

“Just how many time-stoppers does Ferdinand own?” I wondered.

“Come now, Lady Rozemyne,” Lieseleta replied with a giggle. “You take every opportunity to send food to Ahrensbach, whether it be a fleeting reunion or a delivery of clothes. These are *your* tools he has returned to you.”

I see... I didn't realize I sent this many.

“There must be so many because this is his first time sending any back to us,” Lieseleta ventured. “Filling them all must have been quite the effort.”

I imagined Ferdinand struggling to decide which meals to send me, which brought a smile to my face. But then I realized that he had probably dumped the task on Justus.

Your work is appreciated, Justus!

I opened one of the tools with that in mind, and found a bunch of strange things I’d never seen before organized into tiny groups. Hartmut and Clarissa, who were also peering inside, let out cries of delight.

“Oh my! Ahrensbach ingredients!” Clarissa exclaimed. “These are bound to be rare. Perhaps this is his payment for the ingredients and brewing utensils you sent him, Lady Rozemyne.”

“And there are notes explaining what they are,” Hartmut added.

“Taking them straight to the library workshop seems ideal.”

And so it was.

I cracked open the next box, and the smell of the ocean immediately struck my senses. I pushed aside the lid without another moment’s hesitation, and took in the grand sight before me. There were a ton of tiny spresches packed into one corner, and regisches as well. I also spotted plenty of fish I didn’t recognize and some that had already been cut up, but that was fine; the accompanying notes explained what they were and how to prepare them.

“Yesss! Fish!” I cheered. “There’s so much!”

“Lady Rozemyne, please close the box before the fish start moving!” Damuel shouted. He then hastily replaced the lid, removing the fish from my sight—but simply knowing they were there was enough to fill my heart with glee.

Thank you, Ferdinand! I’m so happy right now!

There were so many fish recipes whirling through my mind that my head started to swim. It was a shame that we couldn’t cook them with soy sauce, but I was absolutely going to make spresch fish balls.

“Lady Rozemyne, where should we take this fish?”

“Divide it evenly between the castle and temple. I wish to share this joy with everyone.”

Also among the luggage were small accessories, trinkets, jars of spices, and seasonings that would nicely complement Ahrensbach dishes—a thank-you from Letizia for the sweets I’d sent her. There were various letters as well.

“We can sort through these jars in the library alongside the ingredients,” I said.

“Understood.”

After going through the rest of the luggage, I sent the carriages to my library and the temple. I made sure to inform Lasfam by ordonnanz and Fran by flying letter that a lot of goods were headed their way.

“Though I’m sure this was tiring enough,” Lieseleta said, “there will be more sorting to do when we return to your room.”

I nodded. We would need to decide who should receive the cloth and accessories, and in what order. I was already weary from all the delicate socializing—which I really wasn’t suited to—but I made my way to my room in the northern building. Wilfried,

Charlotte, and Melchior accompanied me, all carrying souvenirs from Sylvester.

“So... those packages from Uncle really were all for you, huh?” Wilfried said, looking exasperated.

I pursed my lips. “And you all got things from Sylvester, I see. He didn’t get me anything.”

“You got all that luggage, yet you still want more?!”

“Packages from Ferdinand aren’t the same as souvenirs from my adoptive father.” Yes, Sylvester had complained about needing to prepare souvenirs for his kids at the very last minute after seeing that none of the luggage was for them, but that wasn’t my fault.

“Our sister was the only one who sent food and ingredients to Uncle, remember?” Charlotte noted. “It is only natural that she would be the only one to receive packages in response.”

She was completely right. Ferdinand had given me all that luggage in return for the things I’d sent him, so it wasn’t the slightest bit unusual. Then again, I supposed that he could have at least given my siblings something out of courtesy. That he had given them nothing at all was pretty harsh—but also a little admirable. He really was the kind of person who did the bare minimum that was required not to be outright offensive.

I thought back to when Ferdinand initially moved to Ahrensbach. I’d prepared gifts for Letizia as well as Detlinde, which he had said was superfluous, since Detlinde would most likely share a portion of the gifts she received with her sister anyway.

“He knows you have siblings,” Wilfried said. “Couldn’t he have been a bit more considerate?”

“I do feel a bit left out...” Melchior agreed.

I paused, unsure whether I should say what I really thought... then decided that I might as well. “Ferdinand never received that kind of consideration from Lady Veronica—any souvenirs and the like he received were probably hand-me-downs from his brother. So while you might consider it common sense, he was likely never taught that you should send gifts to a person’s siblings as well.”

Wilfried blinked in surprise, while Charlotte nodded. “I know how he feels,” she said. “Grandmother never gifted me anything—not even once. I was only ever given your hand-me-downs, Brother.”

“Really?” he asked.

“Really. She gave you her full attention in the eastern building.

And when you came to the main building after your baptism, Mother and Father doted on you as well. It made me so very envious.” Her words were clearly shocking to Wilfried, but she refused to elaborate any further and merely concluded, “Mother sent me gifts on occasion, but Uncle did not even have that. We cannot blame him for not understanding these things.”

“Indeed,” I said. “Ferdinand most likely assumed that I would distribute the gifts to you all. You will receive shares of the cloth and fish, so please treat them as if he had given them to you directly.”

“I’m looking forward to it!” Melchior replied, sincerely overjoyed.

As I was dividing up the gifts in my room, dinnertime arrived in the blink of an eye. I made my way to the dining hall, looking forward to hearing about Sylvester’s trip.

“How was Ahrensbach?” I asked. “Has Ferdinand received a hidden room? Has he been eating?”

Sylvester nodded. “It’s in the western building, but yes—he’s got a hidden room now. I checked with Prince Sigiswald, and there was no mistaking it.”

“That’s a relief.” I assumed it was one less thing to worry about, but Sylvester shot me a stern glare.

“We received indirect complaints from Ferdinand’s retainers. They were already deathly busy with the funeral and welcoming visitors from Lanzenave, so moving to the western building on top of that was a nightmare.”

But while the retainers had disapproved of the extra work, having to clean and inspect the new room, Ferdinand had been over the moon.

“Not to mention,” Sylvester continued, “after I delivered those ingredients you gave me, he went straight into his new hidden room and refused to come out. He pulled so many all-nighters throughout the duration of the funeral that he ended up a complete mess. I suspect he was sleeping during the day instead, since he always looked better at dinnertime than in the morning.”

“He was *that* excited about it?!”

“Did you not expect that to be the consequence of giving him a hidden room, ingredients, and rejuvenation potions?”

Ferdinand, you big dummy! I didn’t spend all that time negotiating

so that you could start staying up all night!

“Well, he was clearly having fun, so don’t worry about it too much,” Sylvester said. “I was more concerned about Lanzenave and the Sovereign Knight’s Order.”

“Did something happen?” Florencia asked, concerned.

“There was some kind of attack, rebellion, confusion... A section of the Sovereign Knight’s Order got violent all of a sudden.”

According to Sylvester, it really had come out of nowhere. The group had grown violent partway through the funeral, so the Ahrensbach knights and the Sovereign knight commander had swiftly taken them down.

“Five went wild, and two of them were killed,” Sylvester explained. “The other three were bound and sent back to the Sovereignty at once. They were suppressed in an instant, so no one got hurt.”

By the time the confused guests had turned to see the source of the commotion, the violent knights had already been subdued. It had all started and concluded so suddenly that some people had remained oblivious to the details, and the funeral had continued as if nothing had even happened.

The next day, however, word had spread that the knights had attacked Ahrensbach’s next aub by order of the royal family. Detlinde had apparently spent dinnertime screeching about how the Sovereign Knight’s Order and members of royalty had pointed their weapons at her, so everyone there had ended up under the assumption that a major incident had occurred.

“I can’t even begin to imagine who made it happen and why...” Sylvester said. “But I think the guests came away from the event with much less trust in the Sovereign Knight’s Order.”

“What did Ferdinand say?” I asked.

“He admonished Lady Detlinde, telling her that it wasn’t something to get so worked up about. In response, she chastised him for not taking her side and protesting against the royal family. Didn’t show a lick of gratitude for the fact that he’d already broken his back trying to smooth things over during the post-incident meeting with the royals and the Sovereign Knight’s Order.” He crossed his arms and heaved a frustrated sigh. “She had the king of Lanzenave’s grandson dotting on her and all. He was acting more like her fiancé than Ferdinand. Seems to me that Lady Detlinde has taken a lover before her Starbin—”

“Sylvester,” Florencia interjected. Her silent smile exuded a pressure that said, “Not in front of the children,” and immediately he fell silent.

Oh yeah... Now that I think about it, didn't Detlinde mention having a love that transcended status in the Royal Academy? I thought she split up with him, but apparently not.

Plus, if she already had a lover who was treating her well, then Ferdinand would come across as an even worse partner to deal with. He seemed nice at a glance, but the closer you got with him, the more crudely he treated you.

“Lanzenave is located outside of Yurgenschmidt, right?” Charlotte asked, having read the room and decided to change the subject. “Is there a reason it had representatives at Aub Ahrensbach’s funeral?”

Sylvester leapt at the opportunity to escape Florencia’s harsh glare. “Ahrensbach and Lanzenave mingle as a result of the country gate that connects them. Representatives from Lanzenave stay in Ahrensbach from around the end of spring until the end of autumn, and merchant ships start going back and forth between them. It was my first time seeing ships come out of a country gate, and it really was something else. Seeing the giant gate sticking up out of the ocean was impressive too.”

Because Ahrensbach and Lanzenave interacted so often, representatives from the latter had felt justified in attending the funeral. The outfits they had worn were apparently made with silver cloth.

“I only saw them from afar, and we only have a scrap to compare them to, so I can’t say anything for sure... but the silver of their clothes stood out to me. It wouldn’t be strange for Lanzenave to have a material that doesn’t contain any mana at all, would it?”

Bonifatius frowned, having been the one to discover the silver cloth in Gerlach. “We’ll need to be cautious, but the cloth is immune to mana, not attacks in general. It would prove tremendously useful against an assassination or during a quick back-and-forth at the start of a fight, but in a more drawn-out battle, it wouldn’t provide much defense at all.”

The cloth couldn’t be cut by a schtappe-made sword, but it also wouldn’t provide much protection against a strike from a blunt weapon. And of course, in the case of a mana-based attack, the parts of one’s body that weren’t fully covered would still be

vulnerable. That was why Bonifatius asserted that its use as armor was severely limited.

“So, did you explain the situation to Ferdinand?” I asked.

“Yeah, when we spoke in his new hidden room,” Sylvester replied. “He said that he wanted a sample to experiment with.”

Sylvester went on to note that Lanzenave’s royal family bore Yurgenschmidt blood, which really made them stand out from their countrymen. The royals were fair-skinned, whereas the natives were dark-skinned with slightly different features.

“I was surprised when I saw one of them for the first time,” he said. “The natives made up about half of the Lanzenave guests, and they mentioned how strange it felt to actually be visiting Yurgenschmidt.”

“What kind of place is Lanzenave?” Melchior asked, his eyes sparkling. “I think I’d like to go there someday. Oh, but I want to visit other duchies first. I’m also really looking forward to going to the Royal Academy—my brother and sisters have told me so many stories about their experiences there.”

I gave an enthusiastic nod and said, “I feel the same way. I want to explore a Lanzenave library at least once. It fascinates me to think about what kind of books they might have there. And of course, I am similarly interested in the libraries of other duchies. Given their long histories, Klassenberg and Dunkelfelger must have some truly wondrous things to read.”

I could swoon just thinking about it.

As I imagined rows upon rows of books, Charlotte gave me a troubled—and rather teasing—look. “Sister, I don’t think you and Melchior are on the same page at all... Though your love of libraries is *very* apparent.”

I covered for myself with a smile.

A short while later, dinner came to an end. I tried to ask Sylvester for more details about Ferdinand, but he swiftly refused.

“Rozemyne, there were some letters among the luggage you received, remember?” he said. “You might as well read those. Oh, and one of them should be from Lady Letizia. Write her a response as soon as you can.”

“Understood.”

Letters from Ferdinand

“Well, I suppose it *would* make sense to read and respond to the letters sooner rather than later...” I mused to my retainers after dinner. “But I sent the box containing them to my library. Guess I’ll need to wait until tomorrow.”

“And the goods here that still need to be sorted through?” Otilie asked, shooting a concerned glance at the boxes of cloth.

“My attendants may choose cloth that will suit me of each divine color. Then they can select some to be given to Florencia, Charlotte, Mother, and Aurelia.”

“You will need to host tea parties to distribute it. Do you have any dates in mind?”

“Hm? Tea parties...?”

In a shocking twist, such exchanges were best done in private. This was to prevent the recipients from comparing their gifts and then wishing they had gotten something else.

Ouch, this is annoying. I don’t want to hold a ton of tea parties just to distribute souvenirs!

“Otilie, I do not have the time to select the cloth and then hold a tea party for each individual,” I said. “Please think of some other way we can distribute it.”

My retainers knew better than anyone that I was too busy with the handovers. They fell into thought, contemplating an alternative.

“I would not like to ask this of Florencia while she is pregnant,” I said, “but after we have put aside a few pieces for me, I could always entrust her with distributing the rest.”

Otilie shook her head. “That would not be ideal. People would assume they were gifts from Lady Florencia. Considering faction politics and the balance of power, I would advise you to make it clear they are from you.”

In truth, I was fine with people assuming that the cloth was from Florencia. “I will not be here in a year’s time, so perhaps it would make more sense for her to take the credit. Her position is the most unstable of all, and the cloth should make it easier for her

to reinforce her faction.”

Wilfried was fine with our engagement coming to an end; he had wanted to escape it so desperately that he had even told Sylvester he would give up on becoming the next aub. Charlotte and Melchior were fine with it as well, since it meant they had more options for their future. Indeed, according to Hartmut, *Florenzia* was the one who would struggle most. Her power had only been secure because of her son’s engagement to me, and the support of the Leisegangs that would come with our marriage. Sylvester’s decision to take Brunhilde as a second wife wouldn’t have given her any cause for concern if everything had gone to plan.

Brunhilde was a similar age to me, so her children would never have been prioritized over a child born to Wilfried and me. That was why *Florenzia* had welcomed her as the duchy’s second wife. But the cancellation of my engagement had turned everything on its head—the Leisegangs were going to side fully with Brunhilde, and if she had any kids, the chances of *Florenzia*’s children becoming the next aub would plummet.

“Would you not also prioritize Brunhilde, a Leisegang and one of your retainers?” Otilie asked quietly. “If your engagement to Lord Wilfried is being canceled alongside your adoption to the archduke, then your only connection to Ehrenfest is going to be through your blood relatives. That is, the Leisegangs.”

My retainers were patiently awaiting my answer. It would surely have an enormous impact on those who remained in Ehrenfest.

“I wish to strengthen *Florenzia*’s and Charlotte’s positions,” I said clearly while looking over my retainers, most of whom were Leisegangs. I didn’t want *Florenzia* to be any worse off, nor did I want Charlotte to be stifled when she was staying in Ehrenfest to act as a mediator for me. “Brunhilde sought to be the second wife so that she could unify the Leisegangs and stabilize the duchy. She does not want to threaten *Florenzia*’s position. Thus, I will continue to support *Florenzia*, the first wife.”

In a similar turn of events, Elvira had once been worried about Trudeliede destabilizing her position as the first wife, so I doubted she would criticize my decision.

After a short pause, Otilie said, “Understood. We can give half to Lady *Florenzia*, then you can keep the rest.”

“Wait, do I need that much?” I asked. I’d assumed that I would

take only a small selection of each seasonal color.

She gave an impish smile. “Oh, do you not plan to give any to your hardworking retainers?”

The idea hadn’t even occurred to me, but she was right—it was better to reward my retainers for their hard work before Florencia. I selected a few pieces of cloth that I wanted to keep, then told my retainers to each pick one as well. Once they were done, I sent the rest to Florencia with a letter saying that she should give them to whomever she wished.

The next day, I went to my library with all of my scholars and guard knights, and with Gretia as my sole attendant. We would need to sort through the spices and seasonings—and also break for lunch and dinner—so Hugo and Ella were accompanying us as well. I’d already sent an ordonnanz to Lasfam informing him of our arrival.

“Welcome back, Lady Rozemyne.”

“Thank you, Lasfam. We have arrived to sort through the luggage that was sent here. Were the ingredients taken to the workshop? Furthermore, as per my ordonnanz, I wish to read some letters in the hidden room. If you could have a table and some writing utensils set up inside for me...”

“Everything has been prepared. As for the hidden room, we shall start getting everything ready as soon as you open the door.”

After watching the servants guide the chefs to the kitchen, I followed Lasfam to the workshop. The luggage had already been brought inside, as requested.

“Scholars, start sorting through these ingredients,” I said. “Be sure to follow Hartmut’s instructions. I would also ask my male knights to assist them; there may be boxes that Philine or Clarissa cannot lift on their own.”

It was a common occurrence that when I mobilized my scholars, I subconsciously included Damuel among them. I didn’t want to draw everyone’s attention to that fact now, so I was getting all of my male knights involved. Some of the containers were heavy, and some shelves were fairly high up, so they would have plenty to do.

“I am going to the hidden room to read my letters and write my replies,” I said. “In the meantime, finish sorting through and putting away the ingredients. I assume you are all familiar with the system

we use.”

“Of course,” they replied. “You may count on us.”

My workshops in the temple and my library had both been set up by Ferdinand, so they were organized in the same way. Hartmut and Clarissa were proudly declaring that they had the layout memorized, so it seemed okay to leave everything to them.

I asked Gretia to fetch the letters from Letizia’s box, then went with Lasfam to my room on the third floor. “Because we are so short of time,” he said, “I plan to use this table and these utensils. Is that acceptable, Lady Rozemyne?”

“Certainly. There is no need to prepare new furniture.”

I opened the hidden room. Inside were several chairs, and the magic tool containing the highest praise that Ferdinand ever gave: “very good.” I didn’t really want anyone to touch the tool, so I took the bag in which it was stashed out of the hidden room while everything was prepared.

Once the table was ready for me, I asked Gretia to fetch the ink and paper brought from the castle, as well as the letters. I also had my invisible ink with me.

Perfect.

“Well, I am going to read,” I said. “Angelica will suffice as my guard. The rest of you can help with the sorting. I will summon you if you are needed.”

I entered the hidden room alone, then briskly read through Letizia’s letter. I was starting with hers because Sylvester had told me to respond to her as soon as I could. It definitely wasn’t because I expected the ones from Ferdinand to be full of complaints.

Letizia had apparently been delighted to receive a cute shumil that spoke messages from her parents—and while she had initially struggled to use the other shumil against Ferdinand, Justus had shown her the ropes.

“Thanks to Justus, I am now quite skilled at using the shumil.’ Hm... That’s kind of surreal to imagine.”

I could picture him calling out, “Now!” partway through a lesson, while Ferdinand watched them with a deep furrow in his brow. The thought actually made me snort with laughter. Ferdinand would probably frown even harder when he heard my voice say that he should be more generous with his compliments, but he would comply in the end. Of course, I would only ever watch this happen from afar; making my presence known would cause

Ferdinand to vent his frustrations at me.

“Still, Lady Letizia must struggle without sweets...” I mused aloud. “Be more kind to her, Ferdinand.”

The letter said that her education had intensified after the conclusion of the Archduke Conference. She didn’t state the reason, only that it was absolutely necessary for Ahrensbach. And while she was still exhausted, she said that Ehrenfest sweets and her shumil magic tool were playing crucial roles in helping her get through it.

“Mm... She may need new kinds of sweets, then.”

I’d previously sent over bags of cookies and sliced pound cake so that Ferdinand wouldn’t even need to consider portion sizes when rewarding Letizia, but perhaps she would enjoy something that needed to be stored in the time-stopping magic tool, such as ice cream or tiramisu.

In any case, Letizia had written to say that she was extremely grateful—and when she had learned that Ferdinand was sending me some thank-you presents, she had decided to add a few of her own. She hadn’t actually known what to give me, so Justus had advised something that would expand my cooking options, such as spices or seasonings. They must have been on good terms.

Or maybe he’s just more approachable than Ferdinand or Eckhart...

“Let’s see... ‘As you might not know how to use seasonings that aren’t found in Ehrenfest, I have followed Justus’s advice and included some Ahrensbach recipes acquired from my head chef.’ Wow! Lady Letizia is such a good girl!”

I wasted no time looking over the recipes. They all required ingredients I’d never used before, so I couldn’t even begin to imagine what they might taste like. I would need to wait for Hugo and the others to make them for me, and I couldn’t wait.

Maybe I should give Lady Letizia some of the food we make with the spices and seasonings she sent us...

I wrote that I would be sending her new kinds of sweets to make her studying even a little bit more enjoyable, that I was glad she appreciated the shumils we’d given her, and that I would let her try some of whatever we made with the spices and such we’d received.

I couldn’t just ask Ferdinand to go easier on Letizia; even she understood that there was probably a reason he was being stricter with her education. At the very least, though, I would say that he needed to lower his requirements for giving out praise and

commend his pupil more generously.

She might even need a sound-recording magic tool that says “very good” on demand.

After finishing Letizia’s letter, it was time to read the ones from Ferdinand. There were several—some full of praise and others full of criticisms, I presumed.

“Where to start...?”

My heart raced as I broke the first seal... and immediately saw a massive wall of criticisms.

To begin with, Ferdinand said that it was completely abnormal to negotiate with royalty for a mere fiancé to be given a hidden room, and that I must have been worrying too much to have felt compelled to bargain for his safety from Detlinde’s wrongdoings. He then explained *why* fiancés were seldom given a room of their own: because of my actions, the royal family had ordered Detlinde to share a room with Ferdinand—a man—before their marriage. It had made Ferdinand put his head in his hands, since he had been trying to keep as far away from her as possible.

Noooo! That wasn’t my intention! Not in the slightest!

To resolve the issue, they had both agreed that Ferdinand would receive a room in the western building instead of staying in the main building where the aub’s partner would normally live. But even then, Detlinde had refused to carry out the order straight away—for her safety’s sake, she had waited until right before the funeral, when the royal family were due to check whether their demand had been met. This had required Ferdinand to move while he was already busier than ever.

In the end, the room that Ferdinand received was the same one that Georgine had used as Ahrensbach’s third wife. Justus and Eckhart had performed so many checks for poison before allowing their lord inside that the other retainers had been put off.

But, well, I understand their concerns. Safety first.

According to the letter, after confirming that the room was free of poison, they had cleaned it with one massive waschen and then started the move. In the meantime, Ferdinand had been turning his new hidden room into a workshop.

“This room is farther from the office where I work,” I said, reading the letter aloud. “It has also put me farther away from Georgine’s villa, which makes it harder for Justus to gather information. I could have lived just fine without a hidden room—

though it is true that I wished to obtain one sooner rather than later, so I will overlook your...' Wait, but he just spent an entire page complaining at me! He isn't overlooking anything!"

I scowled and grumbled at the letter. It seemed that "overlook" was another word I would need to discuss with Ferdinand.

"On a related note, I feel more at ease sleeping in my hidden room than in my bed, so I would like a bench or sofa. As I recall, the one I used during the Interduchy Tournament was exceedingly comfortable.' Uh, that was the bench he gave me, wasn't it? The one he said would support me in his place. Is he asking for it back? Or is he ordering another one?!"

It was clear that Ferdinand wanted to enjoy his hidden room to its fullest, but I could sense that he was on the verge of staying inside for good. I would need to consult Eckhart and Justus before I sent the bench to Ahrensbach.

As well as the letter about the hidden room, there was an entire report about Ahrensbach's factions, focused on the presence of Lanzenave. He had presumably written it before the funeral.

After being informed of the king's refusal to accept the Lanzenave princess, the country's representatives had apparently launched into a sob story about their circumstances. Detlinde had sympathized with them, which had resulted in a troublesome situation indeed.

Detlinde had apparently tried to arrange a forum between Lanzenave and the royal family during the funeral. To make matters worse, she had started pushing for feystones to be given to Lanzenave for free during the height of our own mana crisis, thereby interfering with international trade. So dangerous was her behavior that Ferdinand had shouted at her—but rather than reflecting on her misdeeds, she had screamed, "You don't love me at all!" before fleeing to the estate where Lanzenave's representatives were staying.

"Nobody who saw her outburst was able to comprehend where it had come from. As a fellow eccentric, do you perhaps have any idea...?' Wait, whaaat?! How am *I* supposed to know?!"

That aside, the letter made one thing clear: Detlinde was rampaging all over the place. She had taken such a liking to the king of Lanzenave's grandson that she had been more or less glued to his side. This had given Ferdinand more time to focus on his duties, which was good... but it had also caused his workload to

balloon to incomparable heights.

“Lady Detlinde is going to be the next aub, isn’t she? This seems kind of bad...”

Georgine was now engaged in a valiant battle to stop her daughter from spending all of her time with Lanzenave’s envoys in their guest villa. According to the letter, it was a common sight to see her dragging Detlinde back to the castle.

It was because of Detlinde’s brazen, shameful behavior that Letizia’s education had needed to be intensified. The factions of Ahrensbach’s castle were all coming together to make Letizia the next aub as quickly as possible.

Mm... So I guess Detlinde’s actually doing a good thing. Unintentionally.

The third—and last—letter from Ferdinand had been written after Sylvester’s arrival in Ahrensbach. In it, he spoke only about the fey paper I’d sent him. He said that our samples had been of a much higher quality than he’d expected, and that he’d suffered a splitting headache when he saw how much mana our “extremely inefficient” recipe required. He hadn’t even known what to give me in exchange for such a mana-intensive magic tool.

“For the above reasons, I improved upon your recipe without delay. Use my version to brew some more paper, then send me the results.’ I did wonder why he’d pulled those all-nighters, but to think it was because of my recipe! You’re such an idiot, Ferdinand. Was it really that urgent?!”

I understood *why* he’d worked so hard—asking for three hundred sheets of maximal-quality fey paper was pretty unreasonable, so he’d wanted to allow me to start brewing them as early as possible—but still... That wasn’t a good enough excuse for him to have pushed his body well past its limits before a funeral, of all things.

“And all those boxes he sent me were just ingredients for this new recipe! That can’t count as a gift, can it? Ngh... Curse you, Ferdinand. Couldn’t you have at least said that you appreciated my crazy decision to petition royalty to get you a hidden room, and that you had so much fun brewing that you couldn’t stop?!”

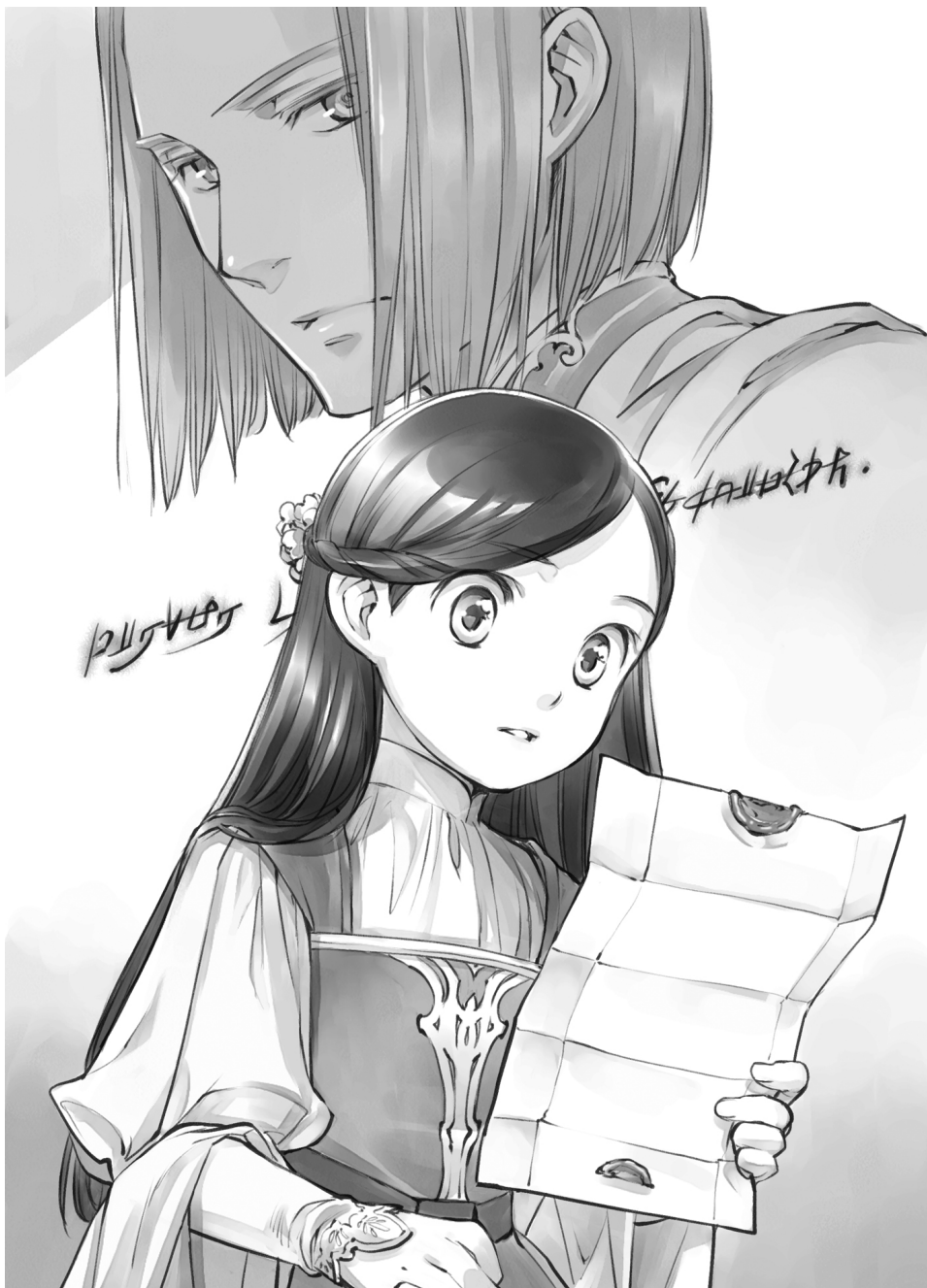
His letter contained so many irrelevant, thoroughly detailed ramblings about random ingredients unrelated to the recipe that I could tell he had been having the time of his life. Would it really have been so hard for him to admit that?

As for the new and improved paper recipe, it was written on the back of the letter in invisible ink. I touched the text to make it shine, then began transcribing it for Hartmut and Clarissa.

“Hm...?”

As I reached the end of the page, I realized that the very last sentence wasn't part of the recipe. I set down my pen and stared at the words.

“Please tell me your Geduldh’?”



I couldn't figure out what he meant. Was my Geduldh supposed to be my hometown, or was it something else entirely? How was I supposed to respond? And on that note, how would he react to my answer? The more I thought about it, the more it confused me.

Maybe this was about my scheduled departure from Ehrenfest. Or maybe the other duchies' actions during the Archduke Conference had made Ferdinand assume that I was becoming the Sovereign High Bishop. I was racking my brain for a hint of some form... and then his face came to mind. He was wearing a silent expression, devoid of emotion. His light-golden eyes stared into mine, and in a chilly voice, he asked a single question:

"Do you wish to rule, Rozemyne?"

Back when he'd asked me, I'd said that my only desire was to read. But now I wasn't so sure. My feelings had changed now that Ferdinand was living in Ahrensbach and under constant threat.

"To save you, Ferdinand... I wouldn't mind obtaining the Grutrisheit and becoming queen."

I'd already acted without consulting him. I was a Zent candidate now, and my aim was to become a princess and acquire the Grutrisheit before the next Archduke Conference.

I wonder what he'd think about that...

Just imagining his reaction was scary enough, and it stopped me from answering about my Geduldh. I wrote around the question instead, then exited my hidden room.

"We need to brew three hundred sheets of fey paper according to this new recipe from Ferdinand," I announced.

Making this paper would most likely be my final interaction with Ferdinand. I wouldn't be able to brew for him after my adoption, and we wouldn't even be able to exchange letters once I was engaged to Sigiswald. My days spent freely were becoming fewer and fewer, but I wanted to help Ferdinand while I still had the chance.

I'll give my answer once I've finished the paper.

The Trombe Hunt and the Starbind Ceremony

“Magnificent,” Hartmut declared. “I am learning so much just from looking at this recipe. These methods for minimizing both mana expenditure *and* the need for expensive ingredients only reinforce the importance of experience.”

Clarissa was similarly in awe. By using methods and ingredients that neither one of them had considered, Ferdinand had managed to drastically reduce both the mana requirement and the cost of brewing maximal-quality fey paper.

“But as a consequence, the paper takes longer to brew and requires a wider variety of ingredients,” I noted in a desperate attempt to promote the speed of my own recipe.

Hartmut gave a wry smile. “That may be so, but Clarissa and I can brew this paper without exhausting our mana. Using the new recipe from Lord Ferdinand will prove much faster overall.”

Mine required the mass production of gold dust, which was time-consuming to make and extremely mana-intensive. That was why nobody else would use my recipe—they would need to brew more rejuvenation potions on top of everything else.

Hartmut continued, “We were barely able to assist you with your recipe. But with this one, which improves the paper’s quality through a careful combination of ingredients, we should actually be able to help.”

The modifications to my recipe had made it so that archscholars could actually brew it themselves—but only by the skin of their teeth. It really went to show how inefficient my recipe had been, and how much of a tall order he had put upon us.

“According to this recipe,” Clarissa said, peering down at the text, “Lord Ferdinand will perform the final stage of the brewing.”

Indeed, on closer inspection, Ferdinand wanted paper that was one step away from completion. In other words, we were to supply three hundred sheets that could be *turned into* maximal-quality fey

paper.

“He must have determined that it would be less wasteful—in terms of both mana and ingredients—for him to complete the process himself...” Hartmut mused. “Perhaps it was your hard work to obtain him a workshop that led to this change of plan.”

I nodded. Now that Ferdinand had his own workshop, he could do the most crucial part of the brewing process himself. That was bound to be the reason for his new instructions, and it changed how much fireproof paper we would need.

“Fireproof paper is scarce and expensive, so we certainly would want to minimize its use,” Clarissa said. Then she looked at the box we had in the workshop; there definitely wasn’t enough inside for our purposes. “Lady Rozemyne, you bought the Plantin Company’s entire stock, correct? How are we going to obtain the rest we require? We won’t be able to buy it.”

I cocked my head at her. “I mean... if we can’t buy it, we’ll just have to make it ourselves, won’t we?”

“The ingredients seem to be rare, though,” she said, looking surprised. “How would we manage?”

I smiled and shook my head. “For now, I wish to keep that a secret. Let us instead focus on cleaning up and preparing ourselves. We won’t be able to brew without our ingredients in place.”

Together with Gretia, I sorted through and sampled the spices and seasonings we had received from Letizia, all the while looking through the included recipes. We arranged everything so that Hartmut and the others would have an easier time finding what they needed.

“Lady Rozemyne,” Gretia said, “the ingredients are all where they should be. What shall we do now?”

“We shall return to the temple,” I replied. “We must prepare for the Starbind Ceremony and speed along the handover, so Melchior and the others will want us back right away.”

Given the circumstances, I couldn’t leave the temple unattended for long. I got Judithe to deliver my replies to the castle, while the seasonings and such were taken to the temple’s kitchen.

“Will you be inventing new recipes with these seasonings?” I was asked.

“Indeed. Since tasting them, I have been able to envision all kinds of new flavors.”

Some of the spices would allow me to make a curry of sorts,

though I doubted it would actually satisfy me. I would need to think of a way to give it some oomph, which was something to look forward to.

I just hope I've got enough time...

Upon returning to the temple, I summoned Fritz and asked him to start gathering taues from the forest. We were unlikely to find any if we waited until after the Star Festival.

“We need to make fifty more sheets of paper,” I said. “Get more taues than you think you might need—oh, and do not bring any of the children who have mana. The last thing we need is an incident in the forest.”

It would be a disaster if one of them sustained an injury and bled onto the soil. We might have been able to resolve a situation like that at the temple, but the forest was out of sight, which made things a lot more complicated.

“In that case, I shall divide the children into two groups: those who will go to the forest, and those who will stay behind to make paper.”

“Please do. And take extra care that none of the children with mana are around when we harvest the growy-stretchy trees; I wish to keep our use for them a secret.”

“Understood.”

I'll only ask my name-sworn retainers to accompany me, I think.

Fritz was especially competent, so the taues I wanted were ready within a mere three days. I went straight to the rear end of the orphanage—for the first time in a long while, might I add—along with my name-sworn knights Laurenz and Matthias. Hartmut was also with us; as always, he had managed to force his way into our group.

Passing through the nearest gate would take one into the lower city. I stared at it for a moment before heading to where the gray priests were preparing the trombe hunt. Seeing them with their hatchets and their baskets of taue fruit came as no surprise to me, but the same couldn't be said for my knights.

“Lady Rozemyne... what's going on?” Matthias asked. “What do they intend to do?”

“Those baskets contain the seeds to make growy-stretchy trees. We're about to hunt them for their ingredients, which we use to

make fireproof paper. You aren't to speak a word of what you see here to anyone, okay? That is an order."

All of a sudden, the knights recoiled—my mana must have tightened around them in response to my command. They solemnly agreed to keep my secret; then I went over to the priests.

"Fritz, is everything ready?"

"Yes. The children are busy working in the orphanage, so there's no risk of them seeing us."

I nodded, then looked up at my knights. "As soon as I throw this fruit, please grab me and step back. Hartmut, stay where you are. Remain on the white pavement at the very least."

I stood with Laurenz on the border between the bare earth and the pavement. Throwing the taues from here would guarantee that they landed on the soil, unless I somehow managed to toss them over my shoulder or something.

Seeing the gray priests armed with hatchets had put Laurenz on edge, but they weren't going to do us any harm. They were staring intently at the ground, waiting for the trees that were about to grow.

I reached into the nearby basket and grabbed taues in both hands. They were draining my mana, but I couldn't feel it as much as before—most likely because my mana capacity had increased since then. The once squishy fruit hardened, and their seeds pushed through to the surface. I could tell from how warm they were that they were about to burst, so I threw them at the ground.

"I choose you, growy-stretchy trees!"

"What?! Trombes?!"

The hunt ended swiftly and without issue, allowing us to gather all the branches that we needed—though my three noble retainers had been stunned from start to finish. I'd grown enough that filling the taues hadn't cost me much of my mana or stamina.

"How could *trombes* be hunted so easily...?"

"I thought they could only be slain by knights with black weapons..."

Matthias and Laurenz were shocked to have seen commoners best trombes with ease, but all the priests had done was chop away the branches as they sprouted from the earth.

"Knights only hunt trombes that have grown too large for commoners to defeat themselves," I noted. "Only then are black weapons required, so what you've just witnessed was nothing

special.”

“Still, why do you want to keep this a secret?” Laurenz asked, tilting his head at me.

Matthias nodded. “Should you not share this information with the Knight’s Order? They could destroy the trombes *before* they become a threat.”

“There is a festival in the lower city during which the commoners gather taues and throw them at one another,” I explained. “It simply would not do for the knights to start combing the forest to destroy them all, ending the celebration that so many look forward to in the process.”

The lower city had a greater population than the Knight’s Order, and the commoners’ use of human wave attacks was already surprisingly effective. Plus, what if we removed the taue-gathering section of the Star Festival only for the knights to start slacking on their duties? The forest would end up swarmed with trombes. The current system worked just fine; there was no need to stir things up now.

I concluded, “There is nothing wrong with leaving things as they are. The Knight’s Order should only be summoned to defeat trombes that prove too much for the commoners and the other creatures of the forest.”

Hartmut gave me a cautious look. “But would there not be immense chaos if a mana-rich individual with the Devouring took part in the festival...?”

I shook my head. “A lot of mana is needed to sprout a taue. Let’s see... An adult laynoble who had started compressing their mana at the Royal Academy would manage, but most Devouring children with that much mana never live long enough to even participate in the festival. On top of that, taues thrown in the city are very unlikely to cause any trouble; they would not sprout on the white pavement.”

The three nobles cast their eyes down. Even in the Noble’s Quarter, there were children who didn’t have magic tools for their mana.

“At the moment,” I continued, “there are several noble children living in the orphanage. There is a genuine risk that one of them might cause a trombe to grow, which is why I do not intend to have the orphans hunt these trees after my departure. Instead, I will make it known to the soldiers and the citizens that fresh young

wood from the forest should be sold to the Plantin Company.”

It would be nice to have the orphanage continue to hunt trombes, since the wood gathered from them was so valuable, but it was simply too risky. I wanted to eliminate as many dangers as I could before leaving for the Sovereignty. Plus, the kids who wanted to use magic tools to become nobles were storing so much of their mana that they were having to use rejuvenation potions. It wasn't the time for them to start expending themselves on trombe hunts.

In any case, the children not aiming to be nobles wouldn't have enough mana to grow a trombe—we knew that because Dirk had spent previous Starbind Ceremonies playing with the other kids, and no incidents had occurred. The orphans would need a mastery of mana compression to make one sprout. Otherwise, they would need to wait until they were adults—and even then, they would only be able to sprout one or two.

Dirk would potentially be able to grow a trombe by studying at the Royal Academy and then returning to the temple as a noble, but he would have more important uses for his mana then. He wouldn't have the leeway to start messing around with taues.

I recalled what Benno had said to me before, when I'd wanted to use taues as a stopgap solution for the Devouring. There was no reason to mention that here and now, though.

“Fritz,” I said, “today was our last day hunting trombes like this. Going forward, I must ask that you only harvest those you come across in the forest, or buy their wood from others who have defeated them. Its value means that we want as much as we can get, but safety always comes first. Once the paper from this harvest has been made, have it delivered to my room. I will purchase it through the Plantin Company.”

“Understood, Lady Rozemyne.”

The Starbind Ceremony came not long afterward. I would need to perform the morning ceremony in the temple, then whiz to the castle for the nobles' ceremony in the afternoon. In other words, it was going to be a busy day.

As the High Bishop, I climbed up onto the chapel stage and gazed across the gathered couples. Zack was among them, wearing the yellowish outfit of someone born in autumn. The girl standing beside him dressed in spring colors was presumably his bride. She was wearing a hairpin decorated with two divine colors.

According to Lutz and the others, the girl was Zack's childhood friend and three years his junior. She was reserved but reliable—someone who had always supported her soon-to-be husband and praised his talent for creating new and interesting things.

During his trips to other cities, which often lasted from spring till autumn, Zack had always looked forward to coming back to the girl. At the same time, she had worried about him while he was away. In the end, her parents had given the couple an ultimatum: they could either get married or split up to pursue other people. Zack hadn't wanted to leave the girl, so their marriage had immediately been settled, leading to their binding today.

May Zack and his bride find happiness.

Despite all the warnings I'd received to control myself, the blessing I gave ended up being slightly bigger than usual. Still, it was probably within excusable bounds. I gazed up at the black-and-golden light bursting near the ceiling... and a shiver ran down my spine.

This much for Zack, huh? Tuuli's coming-of-age ceremony isn't far off... Should I be worried?

In the afternoon, I went to the Noble's Quarter and performed the Starbind Ceremony there. Then there was the feast where unwed adults looked for partners. Hartmut and Cornelius already had fiancées, so they and their partners were busy setting up their single friends and irresponsibly supporting those who wished to pursue their crushes.

Damuel was riding in Lessy's passenger seat, hanging his head. He was the only one of my adult retainers without a partner. In the past, he had always spent the run-up to the event encouraging himself, saying that this would be the one. But he just didn't have it in him this year.

"Lady Rozemyne, I think I should give up on ever getting married..." Damuel muttered, his voice thick with despair. He hadn't been able to find a partner in Ehrenfest for several years now, and there were so few laynobles in the Sovereignty that his chances there would be nonexistent.

"What's wrong with being single?" I retorted. "Books are all that anyone needs to live."

"That might be enough for you, but I want a bride. I envy how everyone else is happily married."

His fellow retainers were lovey-dovey with each other, and

apparently his friends were all married too. One of his adult friends even had a child who was only a few years away from being baptized. Worst of all, when he had grumbled about his troubles to the other retainers, one of them had casually remarked, "And you will probably still be single when it comes time for me to baptize my first child."

HARTMUUT!

"Furthermore," Damuel continued, "I cannot move to the Sovereignty unless I'm married."

"If you want a wife that much, I suppose you have no choice but to wait for when Philine comes of age."

"Lady Rozemyne, she told me to my face that she doesn't intend to marry me. It would be cruel of you to order it anyway." His expression was stern, but he sounded defeated. It seemed to me that he was trying not to think of Philine as a love interest simply because work had brought them closer together.

"Do you mean when you suggested marrying her so that Konrad could become a noble?"

"Yes..."

As expected, he had interpreted Philine's response as a rejection. Back when she had described their conversation to me, she had painted Damuel as a hero for all that he was doing for her behind the scenes. But seeing him now... I wasn't so sure.

"Damuel, I've already spoken with Philine. She told me her desire to be an independent woman, not a little sister or some such who needs to be protected. That's why she wants to do things on her own. Then, when the time is right... *she's* going to propose to *you*."

"What?! Philine? Propose to me?! I... No, I won't be fooled. Not this time." A beaming smile had arisen on his face, only to be replaced with a neutral expression as he put up his guard. It was kind of worrying. Had his hopes really been dashed enough times to warrant such a reaction?

"This isn't a trick, but I should warn you—she's taken inspiration from Clarissa's proposal to Hartmut. In true Dunkelfelger fashion, you can expect to have your legs swept out from under you and a knife pressed against your throat."

"Please tell me you're lying!"

"I speak nothing but the truth."

"This can't be..." Damuel groaned. Though he was cradling his

head in his hands, he seemed more full of life than when he'd been grumbling about the bleakness of his future.

A chuckle escaped me. "If you fear an aggressive proposal that much, I would suggest you act first."

"Lady Rozemyne..." he said, eyeing me warily. "What would you like me to do?"

"What do you mean? It makes no odds to me whether you propose to Philine or she proposes to you."

"No, I mean for the future. You asked Lieseleta to go with you to the Sovereignty, didn't you? As a laynoble, I don't know whether I would be of any use to you there, and the last thing I'd want to do is weigh you down. That's why I ask: What do *you* want me to do?"

As a laynoble guard knight serving a member of the archducal family—adopted or not—Damuel had been subjected to vicious mockery behind the scenes. People declared that I was only keeping him around because we had known each other since I was little. Our current arrangement couldn't last forever, though. By the time I moved to the Sovereignty, everyone would see me as a girl of marriageable age. Bringing with me a bachelor laynoble from my hometown would invite unwelcome rumors.

He continued, his shoulders slumped, "This wouldn't be an issue if I were married, but as it stands, I would only complicate things by going with you. I can't imagine what I would even be able to do for you in the Sovereignty."

"You are a strong unifying force for my retainers. I respect your talent for detecting traces of mana and consider it a virtue to have a knight who is skilled with paperwork. Moreover, because I've known you for longer than I've known any of my other retainers, it would warm my heart to have you with me."

"I... I see. I'm honored," Damuel said, scratching his cheek in a show of embarrassment. That embarrassed me too, but I continued anyway.

"That said, Philine is staying in Ehrenfest until she comes of age. I am also terribly worried that we won't have enough time for the temple handover, and that printing-related business with the commoners might begin to deteriorate after I am gone. Thus, there is a part of me that would rather you stay here."

Damuel had spent more time training with Ferdinand than any of my other retainers and would be able to provide input on the industry while assisting Henrik. Staying in Ehrenfest would allow

him to protect Philine from danger after she became the orphanage director, and the Gutenbergs in the lower city until the Sovereignty was ready for them. In short, there was much to gain from leaving him behind.

“I intend to protect you as much as I can,” I said, “but the road ahead of you won’t be easy no matter which option you pick. That’s why I’m leaving the decision in your hands. I will support whatever choice you make.”

Damuel spent some time in thought. Then, as we finally neared the castle, he looked at me with resolve in his gray eyes and said, “Lady Rozemyne, I choose to stay in Ehrenfest.”

It was settled, then. If he did end up marrying Philine, then he would accompany her to the Sovereignty when she came of age. If not, and nobody else decided to marry him, he would prioritize my honor and remain in Ehrenfest.

“I am glad you have made up your mind, Damuel. However... I think it would be more manly if you stole Philine’s heart instead of waiting for her to propose.” He had radiated coolness while compressing his mana to catch up with Brigitte, and while his love had ultimately been lost, his determination had earned him a place in one of Elvira’s stories. “Being more proactive would appeal not just to Philine but to my mother as well.”

“Being in *one* of Lady Elvira’s books is more than enough for me!”

Tuuli's Coming-of-Age Ceremony

Just as Elvira had advised, I gave Bonifatius a sound-blocker during the feast and, after swearing him to secrecy, asked him to take charge of Damuel for me. He accepted without the slightest hesitation, which was massively helpful—and also massively unexpected, as far as Damuel was concerned. When I told him the news, he went into a daze and could only express his joy.

It was days later when I returned to the temple and promptly visited Melchior's room. Damuel was with me, as I wanted to recommend that he be taken as an advisor.

"Melchior—we have decided that Damuel will enter Grandfather's service, but he is also going to support Philine in the temple. Given his long history of working here, I think he would make an excellent advisor to you."

"Then why not put him in my service instead of Lord Bonifatius's?" Melchior asked.

"Because you might take a liking to him, and it would pain me if you decided not to give him back. You and Charlotte have your eyes on my retainers due to their excellence, do you not?"

Charlotte had privately asked me whether she could take any of my retainers who were being left behind when I moved to the Sovereignty. In particular, she'd wanted my scholars, since they had become so excellent that even greater duchies praised them. I'd needed to refuse her, though; while nothing had been set in stone yet, I hadn't wanted Philine or Damuel to be absorbed into her service when they were at least planning to get married and join me in the Sovereignty after Philine came of age.

"I see. That is a shame," Melchior said. "In that case, I will have my retainers trained while yours are still in the temple." He had given up on taking Damuel into his own retinue, which came as a relief.

I returned to my chambers, then informed my retainers that a peculiar battle was being waged in secret—a battle over who would get to keep them after my departure from Ehrenfest.

Leonore nodded in response, unsurprised. “Many have been made aware of our skills since we started assisting the archducal couple with their work. It makes perfect sense that they would want to absorb us into the archducal family’s retinue.”

Sylvester had sworn everyone to secrecy, so the negotiations were currently taking place behind closed doors... but I expected a full-scale war to break out after my departure.

“For that reason,” Leonore went on, “it might be wise to show everyone that Philine and the others will remain in your service even after you leave, and that they intend to join you after coming of age.”

“Leonore?”

“A feystone accessory marked with your crest would show that you are still their lady. Otherwise, mere laynobles would struggle to refuse repeated invitations from the archducal family. There is no way to predict who might make a move or what nonnegotiable demands they might make, but your crest should make your intentions perfectly clear.”

Indeed, turning down such invitations from their superiors would make my laynoble retainers seem impertinent. The same danger applied to the commoner personnel whom I would eventually have accompany me, which was why Leonore suggested that I give them accessories marked with my crest on top of the charms I’d already distributed. Such accessories would continue to be useful even in the Sovereignty, as they would make the wearers’ connection to me obvious.

Leonore continued, “As your adoption to the aub is going to be nullified, you will need to use a personal crest rather than the crest of our duchy.”

“I already have one,” I replied. I’d come up with the crest of the Rozemyne Workshop—which included a book and quill, an inkpot, branches of the wood used to make plant paper, and the flowers that decorated my hairpins—together with Benno and Fran, and it would remain mine even after my adoption was undone. “But what kind of accessory should we put it on?”

“Something they can wear at all times. A ring or necklace might be ideal, as they won’t be easily stolen.”

Stolen? Well, I guess whatever I give them is going to be valuable...

“Feystones are easiest for me to work with,” I said. “Could I put my crest on them as I would a magic circle when making a charm?”

“Yes, but please be sure to consider the size of the feystones you distribute. You intend to give identical feystones to your retainers and your personnel, correct? That will not do. There must be a clear distinction between the nobles and commoners, and your personnel and their family. They will receive harsh glares in the Sovereignty otherwise.”

I gave a compliant nod. This kind of thing was annoying and not something I wanted to deal with, but it was of the utmost importance to nobles.

“Lady Rozemyne,” Judithe said, making her presence known, “if you’re giving these accessories to your retainers who are staying behind, then please don’t forget about me.”

I acknowledged her request with a smile. “As I will simply be engraving my crest into the feystones, the process should take me no time at all. Fran, contact the Gilberta Company. I wish to order hairpins and clothes for autumn.”

I’ll give them to Tuuli before her coming of age.

I went into my hidden room, humming a tune, then chose feystones for my retainers as well as my personnel and their family. Of my retainers, I supposed that Philine, Damuel, and Judithe were the only ones who would need them; neither Brunhilde nor Ottilie intended to move to the Sovereignty, so I doubted they would want accessories pledging their allegiance to me. As for the commoners, I picked out feystones for Tuuli, Mom, Rosina, Wilma, Ella, and Hugo, then for Dad, Kamil, and Ella’s mom, who would accompany them as family. I didn’t yet know whether the Gutenbergs were going to come with me, so it seemed wise to put theirs on hold.

Hugo’s family was going to stay in Ehrenfest, but Ella’s mom would move to the Sovereignty—she had agreed to start looking after her new granddaughter as soon as she was born so that Ella could return to work without delay. I was told she was a waitress and wanted to quit her job anyhow, so this opportunity had come as a welcome surprise to her.

I think these are enough feystones, and the sizes look about right.

I took out my diptych and stared at my somewhat complex, flowery crest, then turned my schtappe into a pen and copied the design onto some paper made from a feybeast. Once the first sheet was done, I gazed upon the various feystones I’d collected and sighed. Drawing the same thing over and over again was going to be tiring. Magic circles had text and sigils, and would work even if

they weren't perfect, but my crest was artwork; any discrepancies would really stand out.

"If only I could copy this crest..." I muttered. "Maybe I could select it with my fingers, like I would when using a tablet."

Mostly on a whim, I tapped into Urano's muscle memory and used my fingers to "select" the crest. My mana ended up thinly spread over the area I wanted to duplicate.

"Whoa! It worked?!"

A yellow film of mana now sat atop the paper. Somehow, I was on track to actually duplicate my crest! Trembling with emotion, I stared at the section I'd marked.

"Am I actually going to do this? Is it going to work? Okay. Here we go. (COPY AND PLACE)!"

After a few words of self-encouragement, I moved my fingers while staring at the marked space. At once, the single crest turned into two—one that remained in place, and another that followed my fingers. I moved it over to a blank space on the page and tapped, placing it on the page.

"Wow! Holy cow! Isn't this super convenient?"

Enthused, I duplicated the crest as many times as I needed. Then I carved them into the feystones with mana, and that was that. I went ahead and poured mana into the feystones so that I could reshape them, then added some holes that one could thread string through. Now even commoners would easily be able to wear them.

"This didn't take me very long at all," I mused aloud, looking at the pile of crest-marked feystones in front of me. Using this duplication method would make transcribing much easier—and if everyone adopted it, the number of books in the world would skyrocket! No longer was I afraid of marrying a bookless scrub like Prince Sigiswald; with this power, I would be able to fill my villa's book room in a week.

"Operation: Mass Transcription... begin! I'm a genius! Eheheh!"

I exited my hidden room, brimming with excitement, and announced my revolutionary invention to everyone. But as it turned out, the method didn't work on normal paper; it could only duplicate mana ink drawn on fey paper.

NOOO! It's useless for transcription work! My master plan has collapsed in mere minutes!

Incidentally, while I was trying to teach everyone my new spell,

I realized that I'd misspoken the first time I'd cast it, permanently registering it with the incorrect phrasing. Here in Yurgenschmidt, "copy and paste" would forever be known as "copy and place."

Gaaah! What a blunder! I know what it's actually called! COPY AND PASTE! COPY AND PAAASTE!

In any case, my work was now complete. Philine, Damuel, and Judithe were all present, so I gave them each one of the freshly crested feystones.

"This is my crest," I said. "I am told it will make your loyalties clear even after I am gone."

"We are honored," Damuel replied, "though I think you should give some to Hartmut and Clarissa as well. I realize these are meant for those staying behind and your commoner personnel, but still... please consider it."

I promised to do just that—but only if they brought me their own feystones to be crested.

It was three days later when Corinna and her seamstresses arrived from the Gilberta Company.

"I am giving stones marked with my crest to those who will eventually follow me out of the duchy and to any of their family members who will join them," I explained. "They are supposed to keep their wearers from being taken by other nobles. Then, after the move, they will show who is in my service."

I took out four feystones, then continued, "These two are for Tuuli and Effa, my personnel, while these two are for Gunther and Kamil, who plan to accompany them."

"Lady Rozemyne, this is..."

Tuuli had been about to say that the gesture was obvious favoritism, but I smiled at Corinna and said, "Corinna, please tell me when you know which other seamstresses are going to accompany me. I will make charms for them as well. My chefs, their family, and my musician have received theirs already."

"Understood," she replied with a nod and a smile.

Tuuli sighed in relief, now aware that she and the rest of my lower-city family weren't the only ones receiving charms. I took the opportunity to stare at her braid, burning the sight into my mind while I still could. At the end of summer, she would come of age and start wearing her hair up as an adult.

Huh. Tuuli has a pretty sizable chest now. Meanwhile, I'm still flat

as a board.

I was thoroughly compressing my mana for our paper brewing and the entwickeln in autumn, which meant my body had stopped growing again. Only when my work was done would I return to spreading my mana thin.

And if she's coming of age, I guess she's about to get engaged. Tuuli... getting married... Getting married... I don't know who she'll end up with, but I don't like it one bit! My Tuuli, getting married?!

The thought alone frustrated me, and my heart burned with a fatherly feeling of wanting to exact retribution on anyone who would steal my Tuuli from me. In my head, I gave her future husband a vicious punch in the face.

"Lady Rozemyne, is something wrong?"

"N-Not at all. I was simply contemplating a few things. I shall entrust the design of the hairpin to Tuuli, as always, so please use the highest-quality thread available. I will want to use my new hairpin for as long as possible."

I wanted her to make something of a high enough quality that I could use it even after being adopted by the king. It would break my heart if my new status required me to give it away.

I turned to Tuuli. "Your coming-of-age ceremony is soon, as I understand it. Have you prepared your outfit and hairpin?"

"Yes. My mother made my outfit for me during the winter, but I made my hairpin on my own. Because of the attire I plan to wear, I am going to depart from the Gilberta Company on the day of my ceremony rather than from my home."

That was probably for the best; her getup would surely be far too extravagant for her to leave from our apartment in the poorest part of town. She was going to meet our parents in front of the temple, which meant I would get to glimpse Mom and Dad standing by the door for the first time in quite a while.

This is where the fun begins!

"Tuuli, I shall grant you the most wondrous blessing."

"No good can come from favoritism, so I would ask for the same blessing as anyone else. There are already rumors going around that the High Bishop granted an extra-large blessing during the recent Star Festival because one of her Gutenbergs was getting married."

Ngh... I thought it was subtle enough that nobody would notice!

In any case, Tuuli had made it very clear that she didn't want a

special blessing. I wouldn't be able to help that if my heart took the wheel, which meant I would need to form an unironic sequence of countermeasures to safely make it through the ceremony.

I returned to my library's workshop to brew the paper Ferdinand wanted. Our progress was slow but steady. During one of our breaks, I decided to consult my retainers about my situation with Tuuli.

"Why would you want to limit the amount of mana in your blessing?" Hartmut asked me, perplexed. "Just go all out as an amazing saint should."

Clarissa was nodding in wholehearted agreement.

I chose to ignore them. The lower city didn't look favorably upon the High Bishop giving larger blessings to the people she knew, and getting carried away would only make it harder for Melchior to succeed me. Not to mention, Tuuli had specifically told me not to go overboard. She wouldn't be too pleased if I went against her wishes.

"I struggle to keep my blessings under control when my emotions get involved," I said. "But as the apprentice blue priests are going to be watching me, I wish to give a normal-size blessing that they can use as an example."

Cornelius paused in thought, then looked up. "How about using feystones for the blessing? As I recall, Lord Ferdinand provided some that were then used for the Starbind Ceremony at Ahrensbach's border gate."

He was right—back then, I'd used feystones so that I wouldn't give Lamprecht an over-the-top blessing. The same method would surely work again.

Leonore, who was also here as a guard knight, smiled and nodded. "That is a fine suggestion. Lord Melchior will surely be able to reproduce the blessing when he sees that feystones can be used. We would accomplish two separate goals at once."

My eyes began to sparkle. Cornelius's idea would appease Tuuli, solve Melchior's problem of not being able to perform blessings like mine, *and* serve as a good example for the apprentice blue priests to follow, since I wouldn't need to worry about my emotions wreaking havoc. It was perfect.

"Brilliant!" I exclaimed. "Let's use feystones, then!"

So came the day of the coming-of-age ceremony. After quite a bit of trial and error, I'd managed to find out exactly how much mana I would need. Then I'd poured that precise amount into some feystones. My blessing troubles were as good as solved.

I gave the feystones to Hartmut and said, "Hand them to me when I need to give the blessing." Then, after double-checking that everything was in order, I urged him into the chapel ahead of me.

Melchior watched as the blue priests went inside as well. "I am a bit nervous about participating in a ritual," he muttered. "This is my first time."

"Oh my. But you are merely spectating. There is nothing to be worried about."

Today was also the day when the apprentice blues would attend their first ceremony. They were all wearing ceremonial robes, but they were only here to observe, which meant they simply needed to stand near the wall and not cause a fuss.

"True, but it reminds me that I'll need to perform the Harvest Festival, and the thought of that makes my heart race."

The other apprentices all nodded in agreement, looking very tense. They were already receiving cold glares as the children of criminals, so they didn't want to make things worse for themselves by messing up.

"Tension can be useful," I said to them all, "but if you cannot control it before the ceremony begins, then your bodies will not last. You will not encounter any issues today as long as you do not cause a major fuss. Relax."

Unfortunately, it wasn't that simple. The apprentices tried to put on natural smiles as they entered the chapel, but even their best attempts were noticeably stiff.

A moment later, the door opened again, and there came the usual call for the High Bishop to enter. I went inside with the bible in hand.

Upon my reaching the stage, the first person I searched for was Tuuli. It wasn't very hard; in truth, I didn't even notice anyone else. After our eyes met, she smiled and turned her head to one side.

Eek! She's such a beauty!

I was so used to seeing her green hair in a long braid that swayed from side to side, but now it was tied up behind her head. That, coupled with the crimson on her lips, gave her the appearance of a genuine adult.

Maybe because she had done her hair primarily on one side and was now holding her head to show me, I couldn't help but feel that her hairdo was better than anybody else's. And adorning it were the hairpins she had made. She really was a talented craftswoman, so hers looked much prettier than anything the other soon-to-be-adults were wearing. She had one on either side of her head, which made her stand out, but the hairpins themselves were anything but extravagant. They boasted only a modest number of small flowers and exuded an air of purity.

The flowers were identical in color to those of the hairpin I'd given Tuuli for her baptism—the first hairpin I'd ever made for her. Neither the shape nor the quality of the thread was the same, and the tremendous skill with which they'd been crafted made them entirely unique, but the design and color were still deeply nostalgic. That she was also wearing braids on both sides of her head told me that she really was trying to replicate her look from her baptism.

That reminded me how everything had started; the first stepping stone to all this was making that first hairpin together with my entire family.

Tuuli was wearing a simple dress—one that wouldn't stand out in the lower city and that she would easily be able to wear in the future. Rather than sticking to a single color like all the other outfits, however, it made use of the same gradient pattern as my own clothes, indicating that Mom had dyed it. Even if we weren't wearing the same colors, it was nice to know that we matched in some way.

Tuuli placed a hand on her chest, where the feystone I'd given her was resting. It was blue to match her birth season, which made it hard to see on top of her blue clothes.

Aah, geez. I'm so happy I could cry.

I gazed around the room in an attempt to keep the tears at bay and spotted a pink head among the crowd. That was probably Fey. As I recalled, he had also been baptized at the same time as Tuuli. In any case, I couldn't allow my emotions to seep through—not in front of the apprentice blues, who were lined up in a nearby corner.

In a deliberate attempt to steer my thoughts away from Tuuli, I started performing the coming-of-age ceremony. I accepted the feystones from Hartmut, then granted the blessing.

“O Leidenschaft, God of Fire, hear my prayers. May you grace those who have newly come of age with your blessing. May those

who offer their prayers and gratitude be blessed with your divine protection.”

Blue light shot out of the feystones as a blessing—no larger than normal, as Tuuli had requested—which then rained down on the new adults. My dear sister gazed up at it, relieved, then gave me a smile that clearly said, “Well done.”

I did it. I saved the day.

The ceremony concluded, and the doors to the chapel opened. Mom and Dad were on the other side, as expected. I was a little disappointed that Kamil wasn’t with them—he hadn’t been baptized yet, so he was still at home—but then they smiled and showed me the crested feystones I’d given them, which they were wearing on leather cords around their necks. Dad was looking so determined that he might as well have screamed, “You can count on me to come with ya!”

It was selfish of me to bring my family to the Sovereignty—I understood that well enough—but some of the people here in Ehrenfest were aware of their relation to me. Hartmut had managed to suss it out on his own, so maybe someone else had as well. I didn’t know how my loved ones might be exploited if they stayed behind, nor how great my rampage would be if something happened to them, so I was electing to bring them within my sphere of influence. It was self-serving without a doubt, but they’d accepted it with a smile.

My heart was overflowing with love and joy... which made my mana begin to swell. By the time I’d realized my mistake, it was too late; another blue blessing shot up into the air and exploded, incomparably larger than the one I’d just given.

“Wh-What the...?!”

The new adults filtering out of the chapel stopped and stared, while the priests who were busy cleaning up yelped and stumbled. The apprentice blues lined up by the wall were gawking at the surprise blessing.

In an instant, Tuuli spun around and glared daggers at me. I could tell that she wanted to shout, “Myne! What are you doing?!”

I’m sorry! So sorry! I didn’t mean to!



Panicked, I desperately tried to come up with an excuse, but my mind was blank. “I-It was a *bonus* blessing. Er, no, I mean... For the spectating apprentices, I wanted to give an example of a blessing not given through feystones. Ohoho...”

“And what a splendid example it was!” Hartmut cried, moved. He was trying to cover for me, but I didn’t think it helped; Mom and Dad went from looking surprised to barely holding back laughter, while Tuuli continued to fix me with a terrifying stare.

Thus, the coming-of-age ceremony concluded with a blunder of epic proportions.

Interviews with the Aub

The autumn baptism ceremony ended without incident; then I visited the castle several times to give mana for the upcoming entwickeln. I didn't have any delicious blenrus potions to replenish me, so I spent my days relying on kindness potions instead.

We'd reached the time of year when everyone in the temple was preparing for the Harvest Festival. The apprentice blues were busily requesting carriages, gathering together luggage, selecting which attendants to bring with them, reviewing the ceremonies, and the like. This was going to be their first festival, so they were treating it with extreme care.

For tax purposes, there were going to be scholars accompanying the apprentices for the Harvest Festival. I could only hope that they wouldn't antagonize the children of the former Veronica faction. Of course, I intended to make it crystal clear that the scholars weren't to show the slightest hint of prejudice, but once they were out of my sight, there was little I could do.

A meeting was being held to pair the apprentices with adult priests and decide where they would go.

"Now that Philine is an apprentice shrine maiden, will she also be participating?" Melchior asked.

"No," I replied. "She will receive both my chambers and my attendants when she replaces me as the orphanage director, but for now, we are sharing them. In other words, she would not have any attendants or chefs to take with her. Moreover, unlike the other apprentices, she won't need to gather funds to survive the winter."

I was having the underage apprentices take part in the Harvest Festival partially because we lacked manpower, but especially because they lacked the funds they would need for their winter preparations. Had this not been the case, I would have decided against sending minors to perform religious ceremonies.

That said, Melchior was an archduke candidate, so he would have needed to circle the Central District no matter what.

I continued, "To ensure that the temple isn't left unattended, I

am going to have her stay here. I shall entrust things to her in my absence.”

As our conversation continued, an ordonnanz flew into the meeting room. It landed in front of me, then delivered a message in Sylvester’s voice.

“I’ll come in three days’ time to conduct my interviews. Send me a report on the children who wish to be baptized as nobles this winter.”

The apprentice blues stared at the ordonnanz as it repeated itself two more times. Some of them had siblings in the orphanage, so they were probably curious to know how they would be treated as nobles.

“There are two children to be baptized as nobles this winter,” I replied via the bird. “I will get Roderick to deliver a report to you upon his return.”

Dirk and Bertram were the two in question. They hadn’t been the only candidates to be baptized as nobles this winter, but one had returned to their parents, and the other had ended up failing Hartmut’s interview, meaning they hadn’t received magic tools.

Once our meeting about the Harvest Festival was over, I returned to my High Bishop’s chambers. I sent Monika to inform Wilma that we had a date for the interviews and to fetch reports about the two children due to be baptized, then sent an ordonnanz to Laurenz, who was currently training. His younger brother would soon be face-to-face with the archduke; I expected that he would want to give the noble hopeful some brotherly advice.

I was reading Wilma’s reports when Laurenz entered the room. “Lady Rozemyne,” he said, “I received an ordonnanz that the date of the interviews has been decided.”

“That is correct. Please go to the orphanage and speak to Bertram. As a child without parents, he is going to be baptized with the aub as his guardian, which means he will not be publicly recognized as your brother. Still, I hope you will continue to care for him as much as possible.”

By noble standards, Bertram was a child without parents. It was considered entirely reasonable to say that he had stopped being Laurenz’s brother from the moment he entered the orphanage.

“To be baptized as a noble,” I said, “one must have high grades, an unbending readiness to serve Aub Ehrenfest, and zero intentions

of enacting revenge or anything of the sort. According to Wilma's reports, there is nothing wrong with Bertram's grades or his lifestyle in the orphanage."

"I see," Laurenz replied, looking relieved.

"However," I continued, "I do not know about his attitude. He strives to be obedient in the orphanage, but will he show the same loyalty to Aub Ehrenfest? It seems to me that he might not want to serve, without any reservations, the man who brought about the death of his parents and made him an orphan. However, for him to live normally moving forward... Please have a serious conversation with Bertram to ensure that he understands."

Laurenz had given his name after his parents' execution, so I thought it would be good for him to explain how his life had changed, how he felt about the archducal family, and what he was doing to manage his emotions. Bertram had said that he wanted to reenter noble society, but he was likely envisioning a return to the days before the purge. My hope was that Laurenz would bridge the gap between expectations and reality.

"I am grateful for your concern toward the pre-baptism children," Laurenz said. "It would not have been strange for them to be abandoned at any moment."

I would have liked to help them more, but my influence only extended so far. Plus, I was always being told not to reach beyond my means.

"Lady Rozemyne," Philine interjected, "should we not also speak with Dirk?"

"Indeed. He needs a bit more harspiel practice, but otherwise, he is doing fine."

Dirk had only started taking his harspiel studies seriously after he received a magic tool, but still—Rosina visited the orphanage on occasion, and she had reported that he would pass his debut without issue.

I continued, "Dirk had the courage to speak frankly to Hartmut, and it seemed obvious that he had a goal to work toward. His interview with the aub should go just fine. He also understands that he lives in the orphanage only by the grace of the archducal family—something that the noble children have yet to realize—so I see no reason to doubt his loyalty. I do have one concern, though: he appears to lack the attitude and common sense of a noble. Please do your best to convey this to him. As an archduke candidate, I cannot

serve as his example.”

Dirk would need to live as a noble while others assumed he was a child of the former Veronica faction. A laynoble would serve as a better reference point for him than an archduke candidate.

Philine nodded and said that she would do her best.

“Damuel, I would ask you to guide him as well,” I said. “And on that note—Roderick, deliver Wilma’s reports to the aub.”

“At once.”

It was the day of the interviews, and Sylvester had arrived with six retainers: two guard knights, attendants, and scholars each. I went to greet him, but he met me with a grave expression.

“My only concern is whether the orphans can be of any use to me,” he said, “so hold your tongue and respect whatever decisions I make. Saving their lives was generous enough; I don’t intend to carry around any dead weight.”

I understood that here in Yurgenschmidt, my desire to save the orphans out of sympathy was culturally abnormal. It was impressive enough that we had managed to spare them from punishment by association—that much was clear to me after my negotiations to save Ferdinand—so that would need to be good enough for me.

“I appreciate that reintegrating the children of the former Veronica faction is important,” I replied, “to both you and the rest of the archducal family. As you have already saved their lives, I would not speak against whatever you choose to do with them.”

He looked at me for a moment, then relaxed a bit and said, “Alright. That’s all I needed to hear.” It was time to begin the interviews.

As the person in charge of the orphanage, Wilma brought Dirk and Bertram to us, then gave her reports on them. Sylvester had already received them from Roderick, but he nodded along. I could tell from the serious glint in his eye that he was closely scrutinizing the two orphans.

“Hm. I see you have both been working as hard as you can,” he said. “You have excellent grades, for one thing. Dirk, I’m told that you need to practice the harspiel a bit more—but you, Bertram, have nothing to improve upon.”

Sylvester paused, then continued, “Dirk, if you go through with this, everyone in noble society will assume you are the child of criminals from the former Veronica faction. Your new life will be

anything but kind to you, and I say that in all seriousness. Do you still wish to become a noble?"

"I do," Dirk replied with a firm nod, his dark eyes shining. "Just as Lady Rozemyne protected us, I wish to protect the orphanage—but I can't do that while I'm an orphan. I want to be a noble, no matter how much suffering it might cause me."

Dirk was stating his end goal as openly as when he'd spoken to Hartmut, while also expressing his gratitude for having been given a magic tool in the first place. His every word was delivered with nothing but sincerity. His parents hadn't been executed or anything of the like, so he held no malice toward the archduke.

"Even with the rejuvenation potions from Lady Rozemyne," he went on, "I haven't managed to store half as much mana as Bertram. But I *will* manage to fill my tool in time for the Royal Academy."

Sylvester's expression softened in response to this straightforward declaration. "Both of you are going to be seen as children of the former Veronica faction. As a result, when you come of age, you will each need to give your name to someone in the archducal family. Dirk, how do you feel about that?"

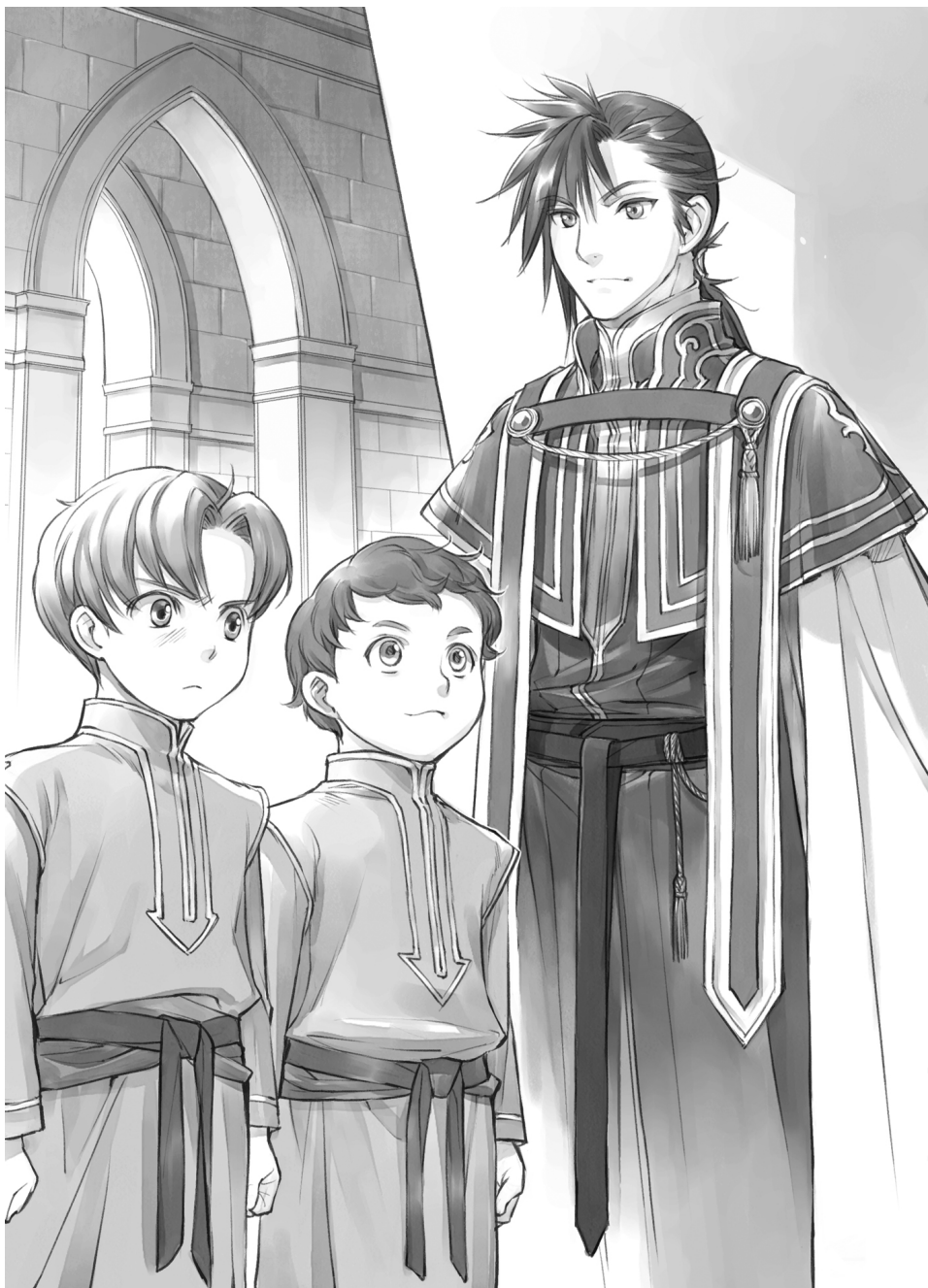
The children of the former Veronica faction had given their names to avoid being deemed guilty by association, and the apprentice blues and those from the orphanage would inevitably be lumped in with them. Dirk didn't actually have parents from the former Veronica faction, but as he was leaving the orphanage to become a noble, he would receive the same negative treatment as everyone else.

Upon hearing this explanation, Dirk looked quizzically at Sylvester. "I get to choose who I give my name to? In that case, I wish to serve someone who will protect the orphanage. As an orphan, you never know who might purchase you or take you as an attendant, or how they might treat you. I was told that in the past, it wasn't rare for gray priests to be killed at the whims of their lord or lady. Compared to those dark days, having the option to choose who I serve is a blessing."

Dirk's way of thinking was nothing like that of a regular noble. Sylvester gave a bitter smile, nodded, and said, "I see. You consider it a blessing... Well, I accept you as an Ehrenfest noble."

"I am honored," Dirk replied—then quietly muttered, "Yes!" in celebration.

Sylvester turned to Bertram and met him with a steady gaze.
“You look as if you have something to say.”



Bertram remained silent, so Sylvester urged him to speak with a somewhat forceful, “Go ahead.”

“Is an orphan like Dirk really becoming a noble?”

“You’re an orphan too, remember. The two of you are in the same position.”

At once, Bertram’s eyes widened in anger. “I am *not* the same as Dirk. I am the son of Giebe Wiltord, and—”

“The man you knew as Giebe Wiltord is no more; someone else now holds his title. And might I remind you that you now live in the orphanage. That makes you an orphan. Even if you do become a noble, noble society will consider you parentless, as our culture only determines parenthood during one’s baptism. *I* will serve as your guardian instead—just as I will with Dirk.”

“I know,” Bertram muttered, casting his eyes down and pressing his lips together. It was a response that made me want to sigh. Judging by his attitude, he technically understood but still didn’t want to accept the truth.

“According to the report I received,” Sylvester continued, “you have been working hard as a result of your desire to leave the orphanage and return to your old position in noble society. Is that correct? Well, even if you are baptized as a noble, the days you long for will never return.”

Bertram’s clenched fists began to tremble. A chaotic vortex of emotions was surging through him, but his only option was to force it down.

“Your baptism won’t bring back your parents, and you will continue to live in the temple. As an apprentice blue, might I add—just like your seniors. Knowing that, do you still have the resolve to be baptized as my charge? Will you serve the archducal family as Dirk intends to? I will not treat a disloyal child of criminals as an Ehrenfest noble.”

Sylvester was now staring sternly at Bertram. The young boy squeezed his eyes shut in response.

“Can you serve those who executed your family or not?” Sylvester pressed. “That is what matters most here. The older children recognize the severity of punishment by association, so their gratitude is sincere, and they are able to serve their lord or lady even while being exposed to malice and mockery in the castle

and the Royal Academy. But you know only that you lost your family overnight and ended up in the orphanage. How can you be expected to feel grateful to Rozemyne?"

Bertram was silent for a while, then said, "I *am* grateful. My brother told me that our parents committed a crime. That they were at fault. That it's a miracle we're even alive. I don't understand it, but I believe him. The only thing that prevented our execution was the compassion of the archducal family."

"I see. So your elder brother spoke with you, hm?"

"Yes. He gave his name to Lady Rozemyne... but I wish to give mine to Lord Melchior." This was apparently because Melchior often visited the temple, helped Bertram with his studies, and played cards and karuta with him and the apprentice blues.

"That is enough," Sylvester said. "If you have considered the name-swearing carefully and made your resolve, that will do. I shall act as your guardian."

In an instant, the tension drained from Bertram's shoulders.

And with that, two noble baptisms had been confirmed. The conversation soon shifted to what the orphans would wear and whom they would bring with them to the winter baptism ceremony. After some consideration, it was decided that they would wear hand-me-downs and that I would get my retainers to accompany them. I was the High Bishop, after all.

Once that portion of our discussion was over, Dirk and Bertram took their leave, while Sylvester and I started going over the *entwickeln* in Groschel.

"The plan is to perform it after Florencia gives birth," Sylvester explained.

"Soon after?"

"Yeah. She said that she'll drink rejuvenation potions to get back on her feet and participate. Won't let anyone convince her otherwise." He personally didn't want her to take part, but as the first wife of Ehrenfest, she refused to budge.

"That sounds worrying. Still, is everything ready for the *entwickeln*?"

"The merchants have sent us plans for the stores they want, while the scholars and Giebe Groschel have the plans for the city. We also have a decent supply of mana thanks to your compression method and my new divine protections. To be honest, you've done more to help than I can say."

“That’s good to hear.”

As it turned out, Sylvester’s new divine protections had made storing mana much easier than initially expected. I was working hard to compress my own mana, so everything would probably be fine.

“Speaking of which,” I said, “how are we going to do the large-scale waschen? We won’t have Ferdinand this time, nor will I be able to travel to Groschel immediately after the entwickeln.”

Simply replacing the buildings with an entwickeln wouldn’t be enough; we would need to clean the entire city as well. The commoners would never be able to get rid of all the built-up filth while also preparing to accept merchants from other duchies, so a large-scale waschen was crucial.

“About that... Could you lend me Clarissa?” Sylvester asked.

“Clarissa?” I repeated, my lips pursed. She was Hartmut’s betrothed, and officially still a citizen of Dunkelfelger. There was nothing wrong with her doing work for me, since she had given me her name, but I wasn’t sure about getting her involved with duchy business.

“I know this isn’t proper, but I heard from Brunhilde that she has an extremely effective magic circle for area-affecting spells. As I understand it, you used it during a large-scale waschen at the Royal Academy. If we can get her support, then Brunhilde, Giebe Groschel, and the province’s nobles should be able to manage the rest. Could you order her to travel to Groschel on the day of the entwickeln?”

We archducal family members were going to be holed up in the Mana Replenishment hall, meaning someone else would need to perform the waschen. Brunhilde didn’t have anywhere near as much mana as Ferdinand and me, so her solution was to get more help and make the most of supportive magic circles.

“I wanted Brunhilde to ask you as one of your retainers,” Sylvester explained, “but she refused, saying I should instead ask you as the aub.”

“Well, I do believe she is right. This duchy business is being held under our instruction, after all. I would not mind asking Clarissa to help you, but I have one condition: send *all* of the archducal family’s archnoble retainers to Groschel.”

“All of them?”

“Yes. I will not tolerate this work being thrust entirely upon one

of my retainers. By mobilizing them all, Groschel will receive the assistance of not just one person who still technically belongs to another duchy but each member of the archducal family's retinue. This is a duchy business being led by the aub—plus, both the entwickeln and the large-scale waschen will benefit from having more participants. I assume the province's nobles wouldn't suffice on their own, and proactively assisting Groschel should make it easier for the archducal family to win over the Leisegang nobles."

Sylvester paused, then nodded and said, "Alright. I'll send word for the archducal family's archnoble retainers to travel to Groschel."

So I sent an ordonnanz to Clarissa, instructing her to speak with Brunhilde about performing a large-scale waschen. Brunhilde sent me an ordonnanz of gratitude not long after.

"I am honored, Lady Rozemyne. Clarissa has sent word that she is going to participate. I did not expect the archducal family's retainers to lend their aid as well, so it would seem that cleaning the city will go much more smoothly than anticipated." Her voice was so exceptionally bright that I could tell she would go all out for the entwickeln.

"I will not hesitate to provide the support necessary for its success," I replied, then sent the bird off again.

A moment later, another ordonnanz appeared. I'd assumed it was from Brunhilde, but this one flew over to Sylvester.

"This is Leberecht. Aub Ehrenfest, it would seem that Lady Florencia has received a visit from Entrinduge."

Entrinduge was the Goddess of Childbirth, which could only mean one thing: Florencia had gone into labor.

Sylvester stood up with a clatter. "Contact Melchior. I'm going back to the castle immediately."

His retainers sprang into action.

"I will—"

"You aren't her child by blood," Sylvester said, cutting me off at once, "so you won't be able to enter the main building's archducal living area even if you do return to the castle. At most, I'd ask you to pray to Entrinduge."

Apparently, it was possible to give mana to someone while they were giving birth, but it would be aggressively rejected unless it came from direct family members such as their husband or children. I wouldn't be able to help at all.

After seeing Sylvester and Melchior rush off, I returned to my

High Bishop's chambers, approached the small shrine in my room, and prayed to Entrinduge the Goddess of Childbirth.

Days later, Melchior returned to the temple. The baby was a girl.

And another week after that, I was summoned to the castle. It was time for the entwickeln. As agreed, the archducal family was to send their archnoble retainers to Groschel. For me, that meant Clarissa, Hartmut, Cornelius, Leonore, and Ottilie would participate in the waschen.

And so Groschel was reborn into a city of pure white, entirely free of dirt and grime.

The Harvest Festival and the Gutenbergs' Choices

The entwickeln had ended without incident. I'd spent the entire time holed up in the castle's Mana Replenishment hall, offering my mana, so my retainers were giving me a thorough report of what I'd missed.

"We all performed the waschen together," Cornelius began, "and Groschel turned beautiful in the blink of an eye. It was a sight to behold. A torrent of rain poured from countless magic circles in the sky."

Leonore continued, "Giebe Groschel ordered the soldiers and the merchants bringing luggage for their second stores to ensure that the city remains clean. Brunhilde also informed us that the first caravan of goods from the carpentry workshops has departed from Ehrenfest."

"The giebe was delighted that so many archnobles serving the archducal family had gathered to provide their assistance," Ottilie reported. "It seemed to me that he looked favorably on the aub for giving such orders."

"I went into Groschel," Hartmut said. "The visiting merchants who had paused there after completing their business expressed surprise at its dramatic change and excitement at the thought of doing business there next year. I am sure that after they return home and give their reports, Groschel will become a topic of great interest at the Royal Academy."

Hartmut and Clarissa had apparently circled the city after cleaning it. They had found it amusing to see the stores without any doors or windows.

"Clarissa, I thank you ever so much," I said. "Supportive magic circles are so tremendously helpful when attempting to clean an entire city. It was improper of me to request your assistance while you are still a citizen of Dunkelfelger, but it really was invaluable."

"I am glad to have been of service, my lady. It was nice to be

treated as one of your retainers.”

We couldn't marry Clarissa into Ehrenfest just yet, since her husband-to-be, Hartmut, was still acting as the High Priest. For that reason, I normally didn't give her jobs that were deeply involved with the duchy. She assisted me, but she never accompanied me to the temple, for example. The situation had evidently made her worry that she wasn't being of any use to me now that the Archduke Conference was over.

“Your assistance in brewing our fey paper has been more than enough, in my opinion...” I said. Still, it hadn't done much to make other people recognize Clarissa as my retainer. It was good to know that this excursion had been meaningful to her on a personal level.

The visiting merchants returned to their duchies as the Harvest Festival grew near. This year, Charlotte was heading to the provinces of the giebes she had visited for Spring Prayer, while Wilfried, Melchior, and I were divvying up the Central District. The blue priests would take care of the rest of the giebes.

“Hartmut,” I said, “I will entrust the Leisegang giebes whom Wilfried visited last spring to you.”

“Of course. Anything to ensure you do not spread yourself too thin, Lady Rozemyne. I understand that as well as helping with the Central District, you are overseeing the monastery's handover and visiting the giebes near Kirnberger.”

I needed to transfer the protective magic in Hasse's monastery and my hidden room to Melchior, then retrieve the Gutenbergs from Kirnberger.

As always, Damuel and Angelica were going to guard me during the Harvest Festival. That left only my temple attendants and other personnel. I watched them prepare out of the corner of my eye—their deliberate movements spoke to plenty of experience—while distributing work to my retainers who were staying behind. Some were going to rest so that they could take Damuel and Angelica's place when we returned, while others such as Philine planned to look after the temple in our absence. As for the underage retainers, I'd advised them to study for the Royal Academy. There was no better opportunity than when their lord or lady was absent.

I made my usual arrangements regarding carriages and guards, instructed the children of the orphanage to work on winter preparations, and purchased more fireproof paper made in the workshop through the Plantin Company before having it moved

into my library. I also started visiting my library's workshop on a regular basis, dedicating as much time as I could to making the paper Ferdinand wanted.

Ideally, I'd like to bring it with me to the Royal Academy. That way, if Ferdinand stays in Ehrenfest's tea party room again, I can give it to him in person.

The day of departure was finally upon us. First to leave were the blue priests going to the giebes' provinces, and the apprentices accompanying them. The adult priests looked very uneasy as they made their last few preparations; never before had apprentices this young been made to participate.

"Kampfer, Frietack," I said, "please look after the young apprentices. It won't be easy by any means, but I trust you to keep everything under control. And apprentices, while you might think of yourselves as superior, since you were baptized as nobles, status means nothing among blue priests of the temple. You would do well to listen to your more experienced elders."

I was taking extra care to emphasize that we had no patience for ignorance, and that they weren't to cause any trouble. The last thing we needed was the apprentices trying to flaunt their noble authority when there was nobody around to stop them.

I continued, "The scholars assigned to tax duties have been told not to act harshly toward you, but as it stands, most of them are Leisegang nobles; they might provoke you or speak maliciously about the former Veronica faction. In either case, control your emotions, and report whatever was said to Melchior and me."

Florencia had already managed to manipulate the Leisegang elders. And after our last conversation, I suspected they had realized that I wouldn't support them simply because we were related. I didn't expect the priests to be treated too poorly if they stressed that they had the archducal family's support.

The apprentices responded with tense nods. Then they climbed into their carriages, which slowly departed after the ones containing their luggage.

After I'd said my farewells, it was Hartmut and Charlotte's turn to say theirs. They were going to travel via their highbeasts, so their luggage and attendants were setting off ahead of them. Charlotte took the opportunity to speak with me about our newborn sister, then saw off the grays and her carriages. Though she had come to

the temple, she wouldn't be leaving with her retainers until tomorrow.

Last to leave were the archduke candidates due to circle the Central District. Wilfried went first, followed shortly after by Melchior's luggage. Melchior himself was going to travel atop his guard knight's highbeast.

I exchanged a few words with the replacement gray priests being sent to Hasse, then greeted the soldiers who would accompany them on their journey. Dad was naturally among them, and the cord around his neck told me that he was wearing his crested feystone.

"We will be in your care once again," I said.

"You may count on us."

Even that brief exchange was enough for me.

After seeing off the carriages departing for Hasse, I produced my Pandabus and got my attendants to begin filling it with luggage.

"Your highbeast is so convenient, Sister," Melchior said. "I want to have one of my own."

"According to Charlotte, one needs quite a lot of mana to change the size of one's highbeast. You will need to work hard to compress your mana after you join the Royal Academy."

He pursed his lips, clearly displeased. "Father said that your move to the Sovereignty means I won't get to learn your mana compression method."

"I... suppose that's true. We haven't been able to meet the necessary requirements since Ferdinand moved, so we couldn't teach it this year. And now that I'm leaving as well, we should probably put that contract to rest."

Mana compression was supposed to be personal; nobles would work hard to come up with their own methods and then stick to those. Matthias had informed me that Georgine was using a multistep compression method of her own, for example. In any case, once I was a royal, I intended to publicize knowledge of the underground archive. Students who wished to experiment with mana compression would simply need to go there.

"Pay close attention to the methods that other people use, then decide what will work best for you," I said. "Oh, and study the ancient language. That is the most advice I can give you."

"I'm already studying so that I can read the bible," Melchior replied. Then he sighed and slumped his shoulders. "It looks like

I've still got a long way to go, though."

I climbed into Lessy and traveled to Hasse, surrounded by Melchior's retainers, then opened the monastery's hidden room. I got Monika to start cleaning up inside and my chefs to begin their work. Then, after giving a few more instructions and exchanging some preparatory words with Melchior, I went to Hasse's winter mansion with Fran and my guard knights.

"Richt, there is going to be a new High Bishop next year," I said. "I have brought him here today to introduce you."

From there, we performed the ceremony and watched a heated game of warf. The next morning saw me going over the taxes with the scholars before heading to the monastery with Melchior. It was time to begin the handover.

"Melchior, this is the monastery's protective feystone," I said. "You will need to supply it with mana twice a year, during Spring Prayer and the Harvest Festival. For now, pour mana into it until it changes color. In the future, if you are worried that you might not have enough to provide, then you can prepare feystones to use. It might be a good idea to have Wilfried and Charlotte assist you with that."

"To think you did it all on your own..." Melchior muttered. He sounded upset, but it was unreasonable to compare us; I'd spent every single day as a child desperately compressing my mana. My life depended on it. Plus, such intense compression from a young age stunted one's growth.

"Melchior, nobody expects you to suddenly do everything on your own."

Once he had registered his mana to the protective feystone, I turned my attention to the attendants and the monastery's gray priests, who were carrying every single piece of furniture out of my hidden room. "Melchior, what furniture are you going to use? I plan to leave most of mine, so you might as well take it. Otherwise, you will need to spend money on a room you will visit only twice a year. You are better off using those funds elsewhere."

Melchior seemed a little surprised—members of the archducal family seldom received hand-me-downs—but the attendant in charge of his finances looked thoroughly relieved. A portion of the soon-to-be High Priest's budget was already dedicated to the temple, but I doubted they had put aside any money for the monastery. Having to prepare and then furnish yet another room

would have come as a very unwelcome surprise.

“He will need new bedding,” the attendant said, “but we would appreciate the tables and other wooden furniture. As you know, Lady Rozemyne, we do not have time to order them anew during this busy handover.”

Melchior nodded, and agreed to use my old furniture.

“Thore, Rick, please move anything that Melchior will not be using into a carriage. We shall take it back to Ehrenfest’s temple.”

“Understood.”

Once the hidden room was completely empty, I undid my registration. Melchior then took ownership instead, and the furniture was moved right back inside.

“Transferring rooms as a noble looks so tedious...” muttered one of the soldiers watching through the wide-open chapel door. Commoners simply needed to hand over a key and that was that, so they found this drawn-out process to be very amusing.

“Mana registration is very secure and provides an impressive amount of protection, but it certainly is a pain to switch rooms.”

“If you’re giving up this room, then you really are moving away. Gunther is leaving with his family, and his departure surprised me too...”

It seemed that Dad was doing his own handover at the gate.

“Oh my...” I said, then shot him a firm glare. “My departure is still a secret. Please keep it that way.”

I checked on the luggage, which was still being loaded, then went over to Marthe and Nora. They were looking after the monastery now, so I wanted to reassure them that its needs would continue to be met.

“There is no need to look so worried, Marthe. The exchanges between Hasse and the temple will endure even after I leave, and the monastery will remain.”

“Yes, my lady.”

“Furthermore, the soldiers who provide their assistance will continue to be rewarded. Please work closely with them.”

“Understood!”

I had advised Melchior to keep hiring the soldiers; they were a great source of valuable information, which he could sell to Sylvester to augment his funds. My merchantlike wisdom had taken his retainers by surprise at first, but they had quickly come around to the idea when I compared it to selling information obtained at

the Royal Academy. Judging by the serious looks on their faces, they were going to wring as much money out of the archduke as they could.

Once the handover was complete, Melchior headed south, while I went east. I completed my section of the Central District's Harvest Festival, then visited the summer estates of Giebes Huber, Blon, Glaz, and Hirsch before making my way to Kirnberger. There, I went through the usual routine: I greeted the giebe, performed the ceremony for him, and took care of the taxes the next morning. Once we had finished our checks, it was time to retrieve the Gutenbergs and depart.

"You have all worked so hard and for such a long time," I said. "Many of you were participating for the very first time, correct? How was Kirnberger?"

According to Lutz and Gil, Judithe had gone to exceptional lengths to ensure that everyone was taken care of. Those who hadn't been on a business trip before had struggled to adapt to the new culture and ended up homesick, but those with more experience had found themselves in an extremely comfortable and enjoyable work environment.

It might be wise to ask Judithe and the others from Kirnberger for advice on looking after the Gutenbergs in the Sovereignty.

I got everyone into my Pandabus, then flew back to Ehrenfest's temple while listening to them discuss their time in Kirnberger. Then, upon our return, I gave them all wooden invitations that Zahm had prepared, to be delivered to their respective workshops.

"I have an important announcement to make," I said, explaining the contents of the boards for those who couldn't read them, "so I am inviting the foremen, the Gutenbergs, and their disciples to the temple for a meeting. Please return five days from now, at third bell."

The very act of receiving an invitation from a noble had caused the disciples to start trembling in fear. Meanwhile, Lutz and Johann were giving me looks that seemed to say, "What is it this time?"

"Um, Lady Rozemyne..." Horace of the Ink Guild shyly began. "Are you expecting Heidi to participate?"

I recalled that she and Fran didn't mesh very well, and that Josef always struggled to keep her under control, then smiled. "As she and her husband are both Gutenbergs, only one of them will need to attend. Please inform Heidi that if she stays home, I will

give Josef some ingredients she can use for ink research as a souvenir.”

I went on to list several Ahrensbach ingredients that would absolutely keep Heidi away from the meeting. At once, Horace’s eyes started to sparkle.

“Thank you, Lady Rozemyne! You truly are a saint!”

Wait, what? Is getting Heidi to stay home really that impressive?

It was the day of our meeting—the same day that the blue priests had come back from the Harvest Festival. Since I was hosting the lower city’s craftspeople, I’d decided to gather everyone in the orphanage director’s chambers, where I assumed they would feel most comfortable. Nicola was off preparing tea and sweets, and there were more chairs in the entrance hall than usual to accommodate our abundance of guests.

As the most experienced of our visitors, Benno, Mark, and Lutz entered first. The rest of the Gutenbergs and their disciples came in behind them, looking noticeably tense. I knew how tough it was to be a commoner entering the world of nobles, so I overlooked the errors in their greetings and the ungainly ways in which they walked.

Before I dropped my bombshell, I noted that I wouldn’t mind a bit of crude language from those who were inexperienced with meeting nobles, and that I certainly wouldn’t punish them for it. That was partially to put them more at ease, but mainly so that my retainers knew where I stood. I didn’t want them to glare at the commoners or continuously interrupt them during our meeting.

“Now, on to the reason I asked you here. There is something we must discuss, but it cannot be made public under any circumstances. Please keep everything I tell you to yourselves until the end of next spring.”

At last, I announced that I was going to leave Ehrenfest next year. I also told everyone that I was planning to start printing in my new home upon coming of age, and that I would require their services to make it happen.

“Gutenbergs, I would be grateful if you or your disciples could come with me. An ordinary noble would give you no choice in the matter, but I shall do my best to respect your wishes. Those of you who are engaged or have other ties to Ehrenfest will not need to move—but if you do stay behind, I will require you to go on long-

term business trips to pass on your skills.”

The foremen were all clearly relieved to hear that I wouldn't force anyone to move with me; they had probably been worried that the successors they had carefully trained and educated over the years would suddenly be stolen away from them. Benno was casually drinking tea, since this news was no surprise to him, but the same couldn't be said for Lutz; his jade-green eyes were as wide as saucers.

“Is your move set in stone?” he asked.

“Yes, I think so. It seems unlikely to be changed.”

“And will we truly have three years to prepare?”

That's the same question Benno asked me! Stop looking at me so suspiciously!

I continued, “Because of their involvement in making my clothes, the Gilberta Company and my Renaissance will need to leave with me at the end of spring. Benno has said that the Plantin Company will move at the same time to prepare workshops, a store, and a new Printing Guild.”

Benno nodded. “I will go first to lay the groundwork for the Gutenbergs. Mark shall accompany me. I intend to have Lutz come as well, but he is still underage, so we will need his parents' permission before we can say anything for certain. I am going to speak with them.”

“Well, I can't let Tuuli beat me,” Lutz said with an invincible grin. “No matter what it takes, I *will* convince my mom and dad.”

“The thought of having some of my old associates with me warms my heart,” I confessed. “However, after I depart from Ehrenfest, I will not be able to move freely until my coming of age. That is why I want the Gutenbergs to wait three years before joining me. The freedom with which I act might not be strange here in Ehrenfest, but we are very much an exception, unfortunately.”

There were some unconvinced murmurs among the group.

“Having minors as patrons isn't normal even in Ehrenfest,” Johann said.

“Ehrenfest is strange for letting it happen, but *you're* even stranger, Lady Rozemyne.”

The Gutenbergs all nodded. I could even see Damuel nodding from where he was guarding the door. How could they? Hartmut said, “Not strange—extraordinary!” in an attempt to correct them, but that didn't matter.

“Those of you who decide to move are welcome to bring family members,” I said. “I have already received reports that the Gilberta Company’s hairpin craftswoman is getting her family to accompany her, and that one of my chefs is bringing her mother.”

“I appreciate your consideration, but I intend to stay here,” Ingo said in a gravelly voice. “I worked tirelessly for so long to get my own workshop.”

Ingo had needed to break his back to get work as a young foreman, but now that he was one of the Gutenbergs, his workshop was among the most popular in the entire city. He had more *leherls* as well, and more potential recruits asking to join by the day. Plus, what about his other customers? I was far from the only one giving him work. He had so many connections by this point that leaving simply wasn’t an option.

To be honest, I understood the feeling. I was fortunate enough that I was able to bring my family with me, but there were still so many connections—and my amazing library—that I didn’t want to leave behind.

“That is perfectly understandable, Ingo. Please stay behind, then.”

“Thank you,” he replied, then looked to his disciple. “Dimo, what about you? I’ll cancel your *leherl* contract if you want to go. Visiting another city was fun, wasn’t it?”

Dimo looked up at me. “Um, Lady Rozemyne... If I go instead of the foreman, will I be given a workshop?”

“Of course. You will need somewhere to work, won’t you? I won’t be able to give you your foreman qualifications, but with your unique knowledge of the printing industry, it should be rather easy for you to obtain them on your own.”

Dimo’s eyes lit up. He had been involved in the creation of our printing presses from day one, so I was more than okay with him taking Ingo’s place by my side. Without another moment’s hesitation, he expressed his resolve to join me—at which point Zack began to fidget in his chair.

“Lady Rozemyne,” he said, “would you order us to join you if we said that we wanted to? *Leherls* can’t do much on their own. Our foremen would just tell us not to ask to go with you.”

“Hey!” barked the foreman of Zack’s workshop, but the young smith’s mind was already made up—his gray eyes were burning with an eagerness to accompany me. He hadn’t changed at all since

he first strove to become a Gutenberg.

“Anytime I go somewhere new, I get so much inspiration for new ideas,” Zack said. “I also love the thought of putting my name on something in another city.”

Both my name and Zack’s could already be found all over Ehrenfest, on the city’s pumps and its modified carriages. Now he wanted to leave his mark somewhere else. I couldn’t help but admire his ambition—and if accompanying me was what he wanted to do, I would readily command it. His creativity and talent for making schematics were beyond compare.

“Very well,” I replied. “If you wish to come with me but your foreman refuses to let you, I will give you an order. However, do consult your new wife first.”

“Oh, don’t worry about her. She’s always telling me how much she wishes she could travel with us Gutenbergs.”

“Still, Zack—consult her. You should not make a decision for someone else when she does not even know the circumstances. I will give my order afterward.”

Yes, the Gutenbergs went on long business trips, but they did so knowing that they would eventually return to Ehrenfest. Moving all the way to another region was incomparable. Zack and his wife would need to have a very serious discussion so that their marriage wouldn’t end in divorce.

“I expect Heidi will want to go,” Josef said to his foreman, Bierce. “How would you feel about that?”

“Forget about her, Josef. You’re my beruf-certified successor, remember?”

The two put their heads in their hands, agonizing over the situation they’d found themselves in. Bierce was prioritizing Josef over his own daughter.

“Hmm...” Josef scratched his head. “Horace, do you think you could get a beruf certification?”

“ME?!” Horace exclaimed.

Such certifications were handed out by the head of one’s guild, and only in recognition of an achievement that had impressed the existing berufs. Obtaining one was mandatory for anyone who wished to become a foreman. Of course, I didn’t have a beruf certification, so while I’d already created my own thriving workshop, I still wasn’t seen as a “proper” forewoman.

Incidentally, there were very few workshops under the Printing

and Plant Paper Guilds, and the ones that did exist had no berufs to speak of. To compensate for this, the guilds were going to grant certifications to anyone who received Benno's approval. One needed to have a decade of experience to officially become a beruf, and I suspected that the craftspeople working to develop new kinds of paper in Illgner would start receiving their certifications as soon as they met that criterion.

"Horace, obtaining a certification is bound to be much easier than trying to keep Heidi under control," Josef said, sounding defeated. "And if you marry Tanna, the workshop should do just fine."

I didn't know anything about this Tanna person, but she was probably related to the foreman.

Bierce nodded, looking equally defeated. "Yeah, that's more practical than containing Heidi. Besides, you already know how to make the ink. It's best to leave that research-addicted, money-draining idiot with her patron." It was a crazy reason to let his daughter and successor leave Ehrenfest.

Horace was still in a daze—he had just been made his workshop's successor out of nowhere—but I wished him luck nonetheless.

"I don't know about moving..." Johann said, regretfully shaking his head. "I'm engaged to my foreman's granddaughter, so..."

The foreman in question looked quite solemn as well. "I'll need some time to figure out which of my workers I'm going to send," he told me.

"Please contact Benno once you have come to a decision," I replied. "The matter is not urgent—not for now, at least."

"Thank you."

We received an update from Benno the very next day—the foreman's granddaughter wanted to marry Danilo, not Johann. In her words, the former was approachable and a good conversationalist, whereas Johann was quiet and always focused on his work. As for the foreman's stance on the matter, Danilo had plenty of patrons, while Johann only had me. It was pretty clear which one he would want to keep in Ehrenfest.

"The foreman said to tell you, 'Take good care of Johann,'" Gil reported. "Johann is glad that he can continue to follow you, but he still seems quite depressed."

I sympathized with Johann, but... it was obvious that Danilo would be more popular with the ladies.

Plus, I mean, the foreman's granddaughter is young. And Johann is an acquired taste.

As I sighed, Gil suddenly looked conflicted. "Lady Rozemyne, I've gotta say something..." he began, sounding cruder than usual—perhaps because he had just recently returned from Kirnberger, where he had spent so much time with the lower city's merchants. It reminded me of the old days, when he had worried about being kicked out of my retainers.

Feeling nostalgic, I took a crested feystone from my drawer and held it out to him. "Gil, in three years' time, I would ask you to join me. That is why I want you to have this. It is a mark given to everyone whom I want to accompany me later down the line."

Gil smiled, then happily accepted the feystone.

While I'm at it, I should also give feystones to Wilma and Nicola...

Nicola was going to move with Philine when she came of age, while Wilma would stay with Elvira until I came of age and sent for her.

I summoned them both to my High Bishop's chambers, then presented them each with a feystone. Nicola accepted it at once and said, "No matter where you might go, I will work my very hardest for your sake." She was staring so intently at the stone that I worried she might bore a hole through it.

"Will you become my personal artist, Wilma?" I asked. "Or would you rather serve my mother?"

"I would much rather serve you, Lady Rozemyne," she replied, and accepted the feystone. "Lady Elvira is an excellent customer, but you are my lady."

That was nice to hear. We smiled at each other until a bell chimed, announcing Hartmut's arrival.

"Lady Rozemyne," he said, "Lady Charlotte is on her way." Of everyone who had participated in the Harvest Festival, she was the last to return.

"Oh my. This is sooner than anticipated. Prepare tea and sweets while I greet her at the entrance hall."

As we made our way to the front entrance, Hartmut turned to me and said, "So you gave crested feystones to Wilma and Nicola?"

I couldn't help but notice one of said stones gleaming on his chest. They were meant to protect those of my retainers and

personnel who were having to delay their move, so it served no purpose for him, but he and Clarissa had fought tooth and nail to receive one each. Damuel had worried that the couple might start lashing out at their feystone-wearing colleagues if we didn't meet their demand, so my hands had been more or less tied. Hartmut was pleased, at least.

"Hello, Sister," Charlotte said, announcing her return.

"Welcome back, Charlotte. You must be weary from your journey. Would you care for some tea?"

"I would, thank you."

I invited Charlotte to my High Bishop's chambers, then listened to her tales of the Harvest Festival. Crop yields had increased dramatically in the northern provinces as a result of the spring-summoning ritual, and the commoners apparently lived much more comfortable lives.

"Groschel completed its entwickeln," she said, "so I said that next year, if we store up enough mana, we might be able to remake their ceremonial platforms. If we persevere, we should convince the northern nobles to support the archducal family."

Charlotte is so skilled when it comes to noble socializing.

Nicola soon came over with some tea and other refreshments. The feystone I'd given her was already adorning her neck, indicating that she'd made it into a necklace right away. Charlotte saw it as well and stared in surprise; it was rare to see a gray wearing any accessories at all, let alone a feystone.

"Oh my. Is that the Rozemyne Workshop's crest?" she asked. "I saw Hartmut wearing one earlier, but what do they mean?"

I explained that the crests were supposed to make their wearers' loyalties clear and prevent them from being bought before my coming of age—and that Hartmut and Clarissa only had them because they'd pestered me so much.

Charlotte took a moment to process my response, then said, "Sister, I must request something of that nature as well."

"Hm? But the feystones are for those I intend to take with me..." I certainly hadn't expected her to make the same appeal.

"Yes, I understand that. I intend to stay in Ehrenfest forever, meaning I will never join you in your new home. Still, the crests are a mark of your protection, are they not? The ones you have given out indicate the wearers' loyalty to you even after your departure, but I am asking for something that will show we are still sisters

even once we have been separated.”

Her show of sisterly affection really tugged at my heartstrings. Nothing demanded my attention more than this.

Because, I mean, this is a personal request from my adorable little sister! She wants something that will demonstrate our bond even after I'm gone! As her elder sister, how could anything else be more important to me right now?!

“Tell me exactly what you want, Charlotte. No matter your request, I shall do my best to grant it!”

“Oh my! I could never impose on you like that, Sister—not when you are already so busy. A simple metal ornament made by one of the lower-city smiths should do.”

“A smith...?”

“Indeed. There is no need to give me a feystone, as it would only be mistaken for the ones that indicate your servants and retainers. I merely want something that will show the world we are still sisters.”

Charlotte explained that she wanted nothing more than a coin-sized medallion marked with the Rozemyne Workshop's crest. By making it from metal instead of a feystone, she said, we would be showing the world that the bonds between sisters were nothing like the bonds between a vassal and their charge.

Together, we decided what materials to use, then drew up some schematics. I summoned Gil once we were done and asked him to place our order with Johann, who would doubtless have it made by the end of winter.

“Johann is very talented,” I said, “so I expect the charm to look truly wonderful.”

“I look forward to receiving it, dear sister.”

Epilogue

Lutz stretched, having returned to the Plantin Company after Rozemyne's meeting in the temple. It was always tense when her retainers attended such gatherings. He had to wonder how the other Gutenbergs were able to endure it when they had even less experience speaking with nobles than he did.

"Whew. Talk about exhausting..." Benno grumbled.

"We are fortunate that none of the craftspeople earned the nobles' ire," Mark added.

They both stretched as well, then returned to their rooms to change; the formal clothes they had to wear when dealing with nobles always made their shoulders ache. Lutz had only needed to dress in his usual apprentice uniform, so he prepared tea while waiting for them to return to the office.

"Speaking of which... Master Benno, have you been told more about Rozemyne's move?" Lutz asked. Very few details had been shared during their earlier gathering at the temple, but Benno had met with Rozemyne in advance of the meeting. Maybe he had learned something then.

Benno waved away the question and said, "The most I know is that she's going to the Sovereignty." He had also been told not to spread that news, especially to the laynobles they were working with in the printing industry.

"It seems like she's caught up in something big..." Lutz commented.

"Still, don't tell *anyone*, whether you're here or at the temple. Who knows how it might spread."

Lutz nodded; he was used to keeping secrets about Rozemyne.

"Also," Benno continued, "plans involving Rozemyne always end up being accelerated. Accelerated *and* expanded. From today onward, make sure you're ready to leave at a moment's notice. The call could come whenever." He was speaking from experience.

Lutz nodded again, sharing the same concerns; on plenty of occasions, they had suddenly found themselves with much less time

than anticipated. Anyone who was used to being Rozemyne's personnel knew to always be two steps ahead.

"After we leave, I plan to entrust business with the temple's workshop to Damian and Milos," Benno explained. "They've been taking care of your work whenever you've been away on business, so the handover should be a breeze. I'll need you to give the place a thorough inspection, though. Make sure the right person's still in charge and that everyone will continue to work well together. You never know when a noble might worm their way inside."

Compared to the lower city's workshops, the temple's workshop was special in that it sometimes received visits from nobles. Hartmut was the most prominent example, but Justus had once frequented the place as well. Even the archduke had managed to sneak inside, though few actually knew this. A single mistake could easily lead to disaster.

"If you and Mark are both moving to the Sovereignty, who's going to take over the Plantin Company?" Lutz asked.

"My little sister Milda. She moved back to Ehrenfest in the summer"—he gestured above them to the rooms where the employees' families often stayed—"and we've already started handing things over to her."

Benno had two younger sisters: Milda and Corinna. The former had married outside the city so that she wouldn't be engaged to one of the guildmaster's sons, but Benno had called on her right before Lutz's baptism, when establishing a paper-making workshop in another city. From that point on, she had assisted in furnishing the Hasse monastery and welcoming merchants from other duchies, while also lending a sympathetic ear. Benno had ultimately decided that she and her husband could be trusted with the Plantin Company.

Lutz had met Milda several times before. She looked similar to Corinna and came across as very sweet, but a smile like Benno's spread across her lips the moment she caught the scent of profit.

"Focus on your own move," Benno said. "Rozemyne mentioned that her personnel can bring family with them. Speak to yours and find out what they intend to do. Once we're gone, who knows when we'll next have a chance to return to Ehrenfest."

Lutz took a moment to let those words sink in. He really was leaving his home duchy to go somewhere entirely new. Being able to explore Ehrenfest's cities as a Gutenberg was already a dream

come true, but the thought of venturing beyond the duchy's borders was enough to revive his boyhood aspirations and made him tremble with excitement. The path ahead of him was broader than ever before.

"No matter what happens, I *will* convince my family and accompany Rozemyne," Lutz declared, his fists clenched in a show of determination. "Especially if Tuuli and her family are going. I won't lose to them!"

Benno gave his enthusiastic *leherl* a flick on the forehead while Mark watched them with a wry smile. "I get your resolve and your determination to go all out, but have a *real* conversation with your parents, okay? I don't want you throwing another tantrum and getting us summoned to the temple again."

"Come on, that's ancient history! How long has it even been now? One, two... Seven years! That whole thing was *seven years ago*!" Lutz found it immensely embarrassing that an event from right after his baptism was still getting mentioned, especially when he was due to come of age next summer.

Benno blinked a few times, either oblivious to Lutz's frustration or merely ignoring it. "Seven whole years, huh? Feels as though it happened only the other day..."

"Because we have been so busy ever since, I would assume," Mark ventured. "Months start to blend together when you spend all of your time working. That said, a simple glance should tell you how much Lutz has grown. He was so much shorter when that incident occurred."

From there, Benno and Mark began to reminisce about the days before and after Lutz's baptism. Myne had been an apprentice blue shrine maiden instead of the noble known as Rozemyne, and the duchy's High Priest had been Ferdinand, not Hartmut. Looking back, Lutz's height was far from the only thing that had changed.

Lutz wanted to close his ears to the entire conversation; now that he was a merchant, he understood just how insane his antics with Myne had seemed to Benno and the others. He couldn't even protest about the incident with his parents, since his tantrum had gotten them involved in the first place. The atmosphere was as awkward as being watched over by an uncle.

"Please let it go already..." Lutz groaned. "I really have grown a lot since then. My mom and dad actually respect what I'm doing now."

"I don't doubt that," Benno replied with a smirk. "I mean, why else would they have let a runt like you get engaged prior to coming of age?"

Lutz glared at him. In the lower city—especially in the poorer districts—it wasn't uncommon for girls to get engaged before or just after coming of age. Boys, on the other hand, normally had to wait until their income was stable. Lutz had only managed to buck the trend and get engaged to Tuuli so soon because of their personal circumstances and the fact that he was already on a good salary.

"I'm gonna give you some time off work," Benno said, "so have a proper conversation with your parents, okay? Oh, and before you go home—drop in on Tuuli, would you? I don't think you've seen each other once since your engagement."

Benno and Mark knew all about the couple's family circumstances, both because they were aware of the Myne—Rozemyne situation and because they were providing all manner of support when it was needed.

"Have you prepared those presents for her?" Benno asked.

"Yeah. Everyone kept pestering me about them."

For various reasons, the engagement had been arranged in a hurry—there was no knowing when they would need to leave Ehrenfest—but that didn't make it any less legitimate. Everyone had told him time and time again to prepare gifts for his new fiancée.

"Be sure to keep her happy," Benno teased.

Lutz rushed out of the room to escape their torment. His recent business trip with the other Gutenbergs meant he now had some time off, but that wasn't the case for Tuuli—she was probably working hard to make new hairpins and clothes in time for Rozemyne's return to the Royal Academy. Or maybe she was already preparing for her move to the Sovereignty. In any case, she was bound to be at her workshop, so that was his destination.

"Oh, Lutz. You're back," the receptionist said as soon as he entered. "Here to meet your cute little bride?"

"Can you get her for me? I need to give her a few things."

"Oh my! Gifts? It really is adorable how close you two are. I'm so jealous!"

Even here, Lutz was getting teased. In the past, he would have argued that they weren't actually together, but that wasn't an option anymore. After all, they really were engaged.

It must be rough for Tuuli. She's had to endure this nonstop.

Lutz hadn't received much teasing at all since their engagement, owing to his being in Kirnberger, but poor Tuuli had probably been tormented on a daily basis. He was contemplating her trials and tribulations when footfalls drew him from his thoughts.

"Welcome back, Lutz," Tuuli said, waving as she approached.

He took a sharp breath. Tuuli might have sounded the same as he remembered, but she was almost unrecognizable. She was wearing her hair up rather than in a braid, and dressed in a longer skirt. They were simple changes, but they made her look drastically more adult.

"Lutz," she whispered, evidently conscious of the grinning receptionist, "I'm on my break, so why don't we go outside? Heading to the plaza sounds like a good idea."

Lutz was used to Tuuli leaning close and whispering to him, but on this particular occasion, the experience made his heart race. Maybe he was still at a loss after seeing her as an adult for the first time. As he was unable to remember what she had said to him, the best response he could manage was "Yeah. Sure."

Tuuli waited not a moment longer before taking Lutz by the arm and dragging him out of the workshop. As they went, he couldn't help but notice the pale nape of her neck, which was no longer obscured by her hair.

Huh? Something about this feels... strange.

Tuuli had grown quickly as a child—plus she was one year his senior—so Lutz had always needed to look up at her. Now, however, he could have sworn that he'd closed the gap. Had she stopped growing? Or was he going through a growth spurt of his own?

Are we the same height now? Or am I a bit taller?

As he continued to stare at her, he hoped it was the latter.

"Lutz, is your head in the clouds or something?" Tuuli suddenly asked, examining his face. "Is anything the matter? You aren't falling asleep on me, are you?"

Lutz recoiled as he suddenly came back to his senses. At some point, they had arrived at the plaza, but he had been so absorbed in his thoughts that he hadn't even noticed. Only now was he registering the sea of noise.

"I, um... I'm fine," he replied, scratching his cheek. "I was just a bit surprised, that's all. This is my first time seeing you, uh... with

your hair like that.”

“Hm? Oh, I guess you’re right. An entire season has passed since I came of age, so this just feels normal to me now.”

Everyone who had seen her after the ceremony had apparently said she had “transformed into an adult overnight” and that she was now “clearly of marriageable age.” By now, however, everyone had already said their piece.

Tuuli giggled, her cheeks flushed, then pinched up her long skirt and bashfully asked, “Do I really look that much like an adult?”

“You do. For a moment, I didn’t even recognize you.”



Tuuli gasped, having not expected such an honest answer, then quickly averted her gaze. She took a seat on the edge of the fountain, patted the space beside her, and said, "I assume you heard about the Sovereignty."

Lutz sat down beside her. "I promised to go with her, no matter how much of a struggle it might be to convince my mom and dad. In fact, I'm gonna speak to them when I get home." He was pretty sure they would give their permission, but Benno's mention of the past had made him less certain.

"You don't have anything to worry about," Tuuli said with a smile. "Dad was just telling Auntie Karla and Uncle Deid that we'll take care of you, since our whole family is going."

"Huh. I'll need to give your dad my thanks," Lutz replied. Gunther's support would make things a lot easier. It was already doing wonders to raise his spirits.

"He said that since we're already engaged, you're pretty much family."

"Family...?"

"Uh-huh. Kamil was looking forward to your return, and Mom plans to welcome you with open arms."

An unexpected warmth spread through Lutz's chest. He had gone to Kirnberger right after their engagement, so it still didn't seem real to him... but that hadn't stopped everyone from treating them as if they were already married.

I seriously need to shape up and change my mindset.

In the meantime, Tuuli brought him up to speed about her family. Kamil would start doing apprentice work for the Plantin Company after his baptism and was due to become the first leherl apprentice of their new store in the Sovereignty.

"He said that he was glad to have chosen to work for the Plantin Company. If he hadn't, he would have needed to find a new job now or become a live-in apprentice, so..."

"Ah, right. That would have been a nightmare. You can't just change jobs in a season or two."

"Between you and me... he was pretty mad that Rozemyne almost put him in a whole heap of trouble."

Lutz burst into laughter. The blood would have drained from Rozemyne's face, had she been with them. Though she had needed

to leave Kamil when he was only a baby, she still saw him as her little brother. Her love for him was so strong that even now, she continued to send him toys and picture books. If she found out that she had managed to anger him, she would probably end up depressed.

“So, tell me what’s been going on with you, Lutz. How was Kirnberger?”

“It was nice.”

The city had seemed empty—closing the country gate had caused a substantial decrease in its population—but the giebe had run a tight ship and made sure that they were comfortable. Better still, the people had all been so nice. They had assisted Horace with his attempts to gather rare ingredients for Heidi, and nursed any of the newbies who fell sick. In the end, not a single spat had taken place between the craftspeople.

“How was your coming-of-age ceremony?” Lutz asked. “Did you-know-who go nuts?”

During the Gutenbergs’ meeting in the temple, everyone had chuckled about Zack’s Star Festival receiving more blessings than any other. And if something like that had happened for Zack, then Rozemyne must have done something truly insane for her dear sister.

As expected, Tuuli looked outraged. “Of course she went nuts! It was such a pain to deal with!”

“I wish I could say that surprised me.”

“It was fine at the start. I’d asked for a normal blessing, so that was what she gave me. She has a surprising amount of control when she actually tries. But the moment the chapel doors opened and everyone started to leave, a *huge* blessing way bigger than the one from the ceremony started raining down on us...”

Lutz could guess from the explanation that Rozemyne had seen her parents when the doors were opened. Tuuli hadn’t said it aloud for obvious reasons; they were sitting in a plaza full of people.

“You know, even the priests were surprised. It was so obviously an accident, but she started trying to justify it as a *bonus blessing*. Like, what? I don’t know who she thought she was fooling.”

Lutz chuckled and said, “Yeah, that’s exactly what I expected.” He could easily imagine Rozemyne scrambling to come up with an excuse of some kind.

“I couldn’t help but think, ‘What are you doing?!’ Mom and Dad

were holding back laughter, but I made sure to give her the glare of a lifetime.”

“Good call. That probably did the trick. You look real scary when you’re mad.”

“Don’t be mean, Lutz!”

Lutz apologized to the pouting Tuuli, then took out one of the presents he’d brought in an attempt to win her over. “Would this cheer you up? It’s some embroidery done in Kirnberger’s traditional style. I also have this painting of some flowers that are rare here in Ehrenfest but are blooming in Kirnberger as we speak. Dimo was kind enough to let me have it.”

Ingo’s carpentry workshop had Rozemyne’s exclusive business, meaning they were responsible for creating any bookshelves, book boxes, or whatever else she ordered and decorating them in a manner befitting the adopted daughter of an archduke. They had ended up needing to rush the doors and windows for the new inns in Groschel, so Dimo had started searching for herbs and the like that he could use in his designs, hoping to compensate with the furniture.

“You’re always saying that you want to see rare flowers with your own eyes, right?” Lutz asked. “Especially now that you see them incorporated into so many of the orders you receive from other duchies. I might not have been able to bring the flowers themselves back from Kirnberger, but I thought these gifts could at least serve as some inspiration.”

“Yay! They’re amazing! Thanks, Lutz! I always struggle to decide which flowers to use.”

In a predictable turn of events, she was most excited about the presents she could incorporate into her work. Her blue-green eyes sparkled as she closely examined the painting.

Lutz gave a wry smile, pleased to know that his struggle to convince Dimo hadn’t been in vain. “Also, could you read these?” He held out a stack of papers—stories from Kirnberger’s citizens which he had written down.

Tuuli started thumbing through them. They weren’t at all similar to the stories from Groschel. Some of them were downright absurd, maybe because they had come from foreigners back before the province’s gate had been closed.

“I really enjoyed the stories gathered from Groschel,” she said, “but I see that Kirnberger has some strong contenders.”

“Yeah. I wanted to rewrite them into a book over the winter, but with everything that’s happened since, I doubt that’s going to be possible.”

Benno had said that Lutz should prepare to leave Ehrenfest before anything else, since there was no knowing when their departure might be thrust upon them. Even then, he wouldn’t be ready until spring at the earliest—and now that he was back from Kirnberger, there was plenty of work for him to catch up on. He couldn’t risk being unprepared and subsequently left behind when Rozemyne’s plans were inevitably brought forward.

Tuuli smiled in response to Lutz’s complaining. “Why not make it your first job once you’ve moved to the Sovereignty?”

Lutz looked at the stack of papers. “I suppose the workshop there *will* need new books...” Saving the Kirnberger stories for the time being would probably be better than using them now and then arriving in the Sovereignty with nothing to print.

“First things first, though—you need to convince your parents.”

Lutz stretched, then stood up—with the help of a quick push from Tuuli. He watched as she went off with her new presents, then started making his way home.

But first: food.

He bought several booklets for dinner later, then packed a bag with some meat, honey, dried mushrooms, and the like for his family’s winter preparations.

Lutz soon arrived at the plaza outside his home, where his mom and several other women from the neighborhood were chatting by the well. It was a nostalgic sight, but he wasn’t looking forward to the barrage of questions that was sure to follow.

“Mom, I’m back.”

“Lutz!” Karla exclaimed, frowning the moment she saw him. “You always come home so abruptly. Haven’t I told you to give us some notice? I won’t have enough dinner for you!”

His elder brother Zasha, who was married and no longer lived at home, would sometimes drop by during work; when he did, he would always send a message or at least warn their father. But it wasn’t that simple for Lutz; he never knew when he was going to be home, so the most he could do was contact them once he was already back.

“It’s fine,” Lutz replied, then raised the bag he was carrying. “I got my own food.”

The women with Karla were quick to voice their opinions.

“Karla wants to give you a delicious meal, not that junk you’ve bought! She wants you to eat well on the rare occasions you return home, so you could at least send word.”

“Ah, but look at that bag. It’s much too plump to be dinner.”

“Must be winter prep. What a good son!”

Karla took the bag from Lutz so that she could peer inside, thrusting a bucket of water into his arms in the process. It was annoyingly heavy.

“Hey! Mom!”

“You rarely ever come home, Lutz. At least be a good son when you do.”

Lutz could only sigh and do as he was told; no matter how long he spent apart from his mom, nothing ever changed. It had been quite a while since he’d needed to carry a heavy bucket of water up six flights of stairs. From his time at the Plantin Company and in Kirnberger, he’d grown used to living on the second floor.

The voices of the neighbors grew quieter as Lutz made his way up the creaking stairs. By the time he had opened the door to his house and stepped inside, his mother had completely changed from the outspoken chatterbox down by the well. Now, she looked at her son with an unusually solemn expression.

“Welcome home, Lutz. You have something important to discuss with us, don’t you? Gunther told us a bit about it.”

Lutz swallowed. At the Plantin Company, they could have sat down to have a proper discussion while the servants prepared the food, but that wasn’t an option here. They would need to talk and make dinner at the same time. So, while helping his mom, Lutz explained that Rozemyne was going to leave Ehrenfest, and that he wanted permission to go with her.

“I won’t say no, since I know you’re a leherl,” Karla said, “but you’re still going to be underage at the end of spring. I’d feel more comfortable if you waited until after your coming-of-age ceremony in the summer, at the very least.”

“Mom, I—”

“But you’ve made up your mind, haven’t you? You’re already away for half the year visiting one city or another, and I can count on my hands how many times you’ve come back home each year ever since you turned ten and moved into your store. What I’m trying to say is... leaving the duchy won’t change anything. As far

as I'm concerned, you went a long time ago."

A wry smile crept onto Lutz's face. His mom was never good at putting her love and concern for her sons into words. Though her response sounded more like bad-mouthing than anything else, she was giving him permission to leave.

"Tuuli's family has decided to go with her. If you want, Mom, you and Dad can—"

"Not a chance. At this point, I can't see a reason why we'd want to move. We have other sons here, not to mention some grandchildren."

"Right," Lutz said, nodding. He'd already assumed that they wouldn't leave Ehrenfest unless something drastic happened. Plus, in truth, he was kind of glad to know that they wouldn't be accompanying him; his business trips had taught him just how many issues arose from clashing cultures and perspectives. Their argument from seven years ago was a prime example; Lutz had cast aside the job his parents had suggested so that he could pursue his own dream.

"Do you think Dad will agree too?" he asked.

"After hearing about the situation from Gunther, the most he had to say was that crying won't get you out of this one."

"In other words, 'stay strong and keep working hard'?"

"Sounds about right."

Funnily enough, visiting other regions and speaking to nobles fluent in long-winded euphemisms had made it easier for Lutz to understand what his dad was trying to say. In this case, he had interpreted the response to his departure as praise—and if that turned out to be incorrect, he would simply blame his dad for not being clear enough. When he thought back to his days as a kid, misunderstanding things and getting hurt as a result, he couldn't help admiring how much he'd matured.

"What's so funny?" Karla asked.

"Nothing. I'm just glad that you're both on board. Master Benno said he didn't want me to throw another tantrum and get everyone summoned to the temple again."

"Hah. That makes two of us," Karla said with a frown.

Lutz laughed. The incident all those years ago had ended positively for everyone, but it had been so intense that none of them ever wanted to experience it again.

"At least we won't need to send you off on your own this time,"

Karla said. "It's reassuring to know that Gunther's family is going to be with you. I mean, we've lived near each other for a while, and we're family."

Because it was so common to marry within one's local community, most people were related in one way or another. Gunther had grown apart from his parents after deciding to become a soldier rather than a carpenter, but his father and Deid's mother were cousins. In other words, Karla was right: they really were one big family.

"Not to mention," she continued, "you're engaged to Tuuli now. You've got a partner, and a good enough salary to marry her whenever you're ready. You're far beyond the point of needing your mom to worry about you. My work as a parent is more or less done."

It was said in the lower city that a parent's job was only done when their child married. Lutz hadn't made it that far just yet, but he was close enough that his parents couldn't really complain. As Lutz looked at his mom, he could sense that she was trying to soothe her own heartache more than anything else. Having to part with one's child was never easy.

"You chose this path," Karla said. "Follow it all the way to the end."

Accepting his mother's feelings, Lutz gave a firm nod in response.

The Lanzenave Envoys

“These documents will require your authorization, Lady Detlinde.”

I rolled my eyes at the scholar, who had just entered with even more paperwork to add to the ever-growing stack. Life had been painfully boring since my return from the Archduke Conference. I did as required and continued to sign one document after another with my mana pen, but the situation made no sense to me. I was no mere future aub; I was the country’s next Zent.

How dare they waste my time with such trifles.

One could not blame me for my impatience. Once I obtained the Grutrissheit, I would at last be freed from this busywork.

My escape would have come sooner if not for those interfering royals.

Because of my current status, visiting the Sovereignty was no easy feat. The Archduke Conference had come as a shining opportunity—but the royal family had gotten in my way at every turn. It was truly infuriating.

I would have learned so much if they had let me investigate that underground archive.

The king’s incredibly rude third wife had scoffed at me and suggested that I first study the ancient language. Just thinking back to our exchange filled me with displeasure, which grew even further when I remembered that asinine order from Trauerqual. He wanted me to give Lord Ferdinand a hidden room, of all things!

And it needs to be done by the funeral, since he plans to check whether the royal decree was followed. The nerve! That incompetent king must have lost his mind. Does he not know that giving an unmarried man his own hidden room is the height of impropriety? Unless I obtain the Grutrissheit and stake my claim to the throne soon, Trauerqual will surely bring Yurgenschmidt to ruin.

It was unbelievable. The future of our country really did rest on my shoulders.

I recalled the Sovereign priests’ pleas for me to become a proper

Zent, then sighed and said, "How troublesome..."

In truth, I was not troubled in the least. They were right to place their faith in me.

Ah.

I met the gaze of the scholar, who was waiting for me to finish signing the papers. My contemplating had stilled my hand. If only the Grutrissheit were already mine... A mere scholar would never dare to pressure his Zent.

But alas, I did not yet have the Grutrissheit, so I resumed signing.

"Hm...?"

Goose bumps suddenly covered my arms, and a shiver ran down my spine. It was the same sensation as having a cold, but I was in perfect health, and there was nary a chill on this warm summer's day.

Two words flashed through my mind: border gate. Someone was trying to enter the duchy without the aub's permission. It was a feeling exclusive to archducal family members dedicating their mana to the foundation.

My father's death meant we were currently without an aub, so we could not close any border gates on our side. There was only one gate in Ahrensbach where such an intrusion would not alert our guards: the one connected to the country gate out at sea.

"I am returning to my chambers," I said, setting down my mana pen and rising to my feet. "Martina—prepare my riding clothes and veil, and gather my retainers. I must check on the border gate."

The scholar was astounded that I would abandon my signing work, so I shot him a scathing look. "You are in my way. Did you not hear me say I must check on the border gate? Our guests must be envoys from Lanzenave."

Only then did the scholar grasp the importance of my leaving. He quickly sorted the documents, separating the signed and unsigned ones, then hurried out of the room with them—to report to Lord Ferdinand, no doubt.

The scholars discuss everything with Lord Ferdinand and entrust him with so much administrative work. That is why nobody could refuse the royal family's bizarre decree. How pathetic.

I spent the whole journey back to my chambers mentally berating the incompetent scholars, who were much too dependent on my fiancé. Then I put on the riding clothes my attendants rushed

to bring me and a veil to shield me from the sun.

I sighed. “How envious I am that men can ride their highbeasts without first needing to change.”

Thanks to that frustrating disparity and the scholars’ need to share every little detail with Lord Ferdinand, he would arrive at the border gate before me. I sped onto the balcony and took flight, hoping to arrive before I lost all control of the situation.

The glimmering blue ocean stretched out before me. In the distance, I could just barely see a tiny black dot attempting to enter the gate. I made my way over at once—and of course, Lord Ferdinand and the Knight’s Order were already there when I arrived.

“Lady Detlinde, is that ship definitely from Lanzenave?” Lord Ferdinand asked. “I do not recognize its style.”

Because he was from Ehrenfest, he had never seen a Lanzenave ship before. Knowing that he—a man who had gathered more support from the scholars than I and who dared to act as though *he* were our duchy’s next aub—needed my help made me feel somewhat superior.

“Indeed,” I said. “Lanzenave has been using that design since last year. I am told it moves rather quickly.”

Lanzenave’s new ship was black and elongated. In a sense, it was like a massive fish.

I continued, “During last year’s welcoming feast, an envoy told me the ships are designed to carry as much luggage as possible while still being thin enough to use the border gate. Ah, behold. They will change in a most unusual way after passing through.”

I pointed, and the ship that had just passed through the gate stopped on its way to the port. Tiles on its surface began to turn, changing it from black to silver.

“And what purpose does that serve?” Lord Ferdinand asked.

“I do not know, but Lanzenave envoys consider it necessary before staying here. Personally, I would rather their ships remain black; that silver is terribly bright.”

Trade with Lanzenave was essential to Ahrensbach’s economy—especially because we had the only open country gate in Yurgenschmidt. Entrusting the matter to Lord Ferdinand, who knew nothing of our culture or theirs, would put our entire duchy at risk. That was why I intended to take full control.

“The boat will dock at the port,” I said, “then the envoys will

come to the castle and request an audience. We shall grant it and prepare for them a welcoming feast as we wait for the boat to arrive. As we have confirmed the intruders as guests from Lanzenave, we may return to the castle.”

“You can go ahead of me. I did not know that gate was unmanned. One might consider it an invitation for Lanzenave to invade, so I shall command the Knight’s Order to station guards there from now on.”

What is he saying? That makes no sense at all.

“That gate is used solely by Lanzenave envoys,” I said. “It is surrounded only by the ocean, and our guests have already arrived. I do not see why we should treat them with suspicion.”

It would be a waste to assign knights to the border gate. Did Lord Ferdinand not understand something that simple?

“Do they wish to continue sending trade ships? Then we will need to keep them under watch,” he said. “Commander, assign guards to the border gate at once.”

“Yes, my lord,” the commander replied. “How many would you advise?”

Lord Ferdinand was completely ignoring my advice, even though I went out of my way to educate him! And the commander, rather than seeking my opinion, was already discussing the details of his assignment. It was unbelievable that they would both disregard me.

“Hmph. Fine!” I exclaimed, vying for their attention. “I shall return to the castle, then!”

Lord Ferdinand did not even turn around as he said, “Lady Detlinde, since you seem to know when the welcoming feast will take place, I would ask you to oversee the necessary arrangements.” Then, without another word, he flew to the border gate with his retainers and the knight commander.

I cannot believe this. They think insultingly little of my talents!

Infuriated that my own fiancé would treat me so awfully, I returned to my chambers with my retainers. The moment we got back, they began making arrangements for the welcoming feast.

“Halt!” I said. “Just whose orders are you following? You serve me, do you not?”

My retainers stared at me in surprise, then exchanged troubled glances. A long moment passed before Martina stepped forward.

“We are not doing this for Lord Ferdinand, my lady. If we do

not give the envoys a proper welcome, Lanzenave might assume you are unsuited to become our next aub.”

“Indeed, Martina is correct,” another of my retainers said.

“There are envoys coming. We would have started getting ready for the feast no matter what Lord Ferdinand ordered.”

“We would not want to besmirch your good name by letting things go unprepared. Please allow us to proceed.”

They were correct, and their revelations cheered me up. “Very well,” I said, waving them away. “Leave the bare minimum here and go do your work.”

My retainers resumed their duties. Meanwhile, Martina came to me with a letter. “Lady Detlinde, it would seem that Lady Georgine wishes to speak with you.”

“Mother does? It must be about *that* again... Please excuse me.”

Though I was recognized as the next aub—or the next Zent, to the truly insightful—I had not yet settled into either position. This meant I could neither lord over my mother nor refuse her invitations, no matter my displeasure.

Having no other choice, I agreed to meet with her. The required preparations had already been made, so she arrived at my room in no time at all. We exchanged greetings, then she handed me a sound-blocking magic tool. Her next words came as no surprise.

“Detlinde, has Lord Ferdinand received a hidden room yet? If everything is not ready in time for the funeral, both you and Ahrensbach as a whole will receive a lambasting from the royal family.”

“I understand that, but granting someone a hidden room before they are wed...? It is unthinkable, Mother. Cruel, even. Fiancés are not normally afforded such a luxury.”

As hidden rooms could not be made in guest accommodations, we would need to invite Lord Ferdinand into *proper* chambers to carry out this unreasonable request. A man who had yet to become my husband would suddenly be able to enter my bed whenever he pleased. It was improper!

Once I obtained the Grutrissheit and took my rightful place as Zent, I would cancel my engagement to Lord Ferdinand in a heartbeat. I did not want to marry him—and to make matters worse, he had once been sent to the temple. He could not be trusted.

Worse still, if what happened so often in the temple were to

happen here, the public would blame *me* for giving Lord Ferdinand his own chambers in the first place. Even though the royals had ordered it.

“That may be so, but if Lord Ferdinand is not given a hidden room, he will need to return to Ehrenfest until your wedding. We cannot allow that to happen—not with Ahrensbach in its current state.”

My mother’s dark-green eyes betrayed not even a trace of emotion, even though *her own daughter* was about to have her life ruined by a royal decree. I had thought she might show at least some concern for my chastity—or express her outrage at the royals for their unreasonable demands—but that flicker of hope quickly died out, as it always did when I expected something of her. I was so embarrassed that I couldn’t even meet her gaze.

But when I am the Zent...

Maybe then Mother would give me the attention I needed. Upon learning that I was a Zent candidate, she had asked me whether I wished to pursue the throne, then told me to do everything I could to secure my dream. It was the first time she had ever encouraged me.

“Get on with it,” she said. “Lanzenave’s envoys are here, and there is not much time before the funeral.”

“If only King Trauerqual had ordered the low-ranking Ehrenfest to be silent instead of making such unreasonable demands of us...” I struggled to understand why Ahrensbach, which placed so much higher in the rankings, was having to meet the needs of an inferior duchy.

“Ehrenfest must have made a powerful move,” my mother ventured. “Still, no matter how unreasonable this royal decree might seem, we must comply. Anything less will incite the aubs of other duchies to scold us.”

I pursed my lips. A mere scolding sounded much better than giving Lord Ferdinand a room. At the very least, it would not threaten my chastity.

Mother gave me a look of exasperation, as if she had read my mind. “Detlinde, the royal decree was only to give him a hidden room. They did not stipulate its location. Simply move him to the western building.”

The western building contained rooms for the duchy’s second and third wives. It had never occurred to me that I could put him

there, since he had come to Ahrensbach to marry a female aub, but it really was a genius idea. We would demonstrate that he was still only my fiancé while complying with the royal decree *and* preventing anything lewd from happening.

Joy spread through my heart. Mother was thinking about me after all.

“If you had such a brilliant idea up your sleeve, you could have told me sooner...” I said with a pout. “I would not have waited so long to give him a room.”

Mother’s red lips curled into a smile. “Now was simply most convenient for me.” The look in her eyes proved that she had not been thinking about my needs at all.

As always. But I did not get my hopes up this time.

From there, Mother declared that we had nothing more to discuss and promptly departed. As I watched her go, I could not help but heave a defeated sigh.

During dinner, I informed Lord Ferdinand that he would be granted a room in the western building. The news took his retainers by surprise, and they questioned me with looks of concern.

“But we are busy with preparations for the funeral *and* our meeting with Lanzenave’s envoys. We do not have time to relocate from the main building.”

I cared not for their circumstances.

“The blame lies not with me,” I said. “Ehrenfest requested this hidden room, and the Zent ordered us to provide it. If you take issue, then direct your protests to King Trauerqual.”

My only role in this whole ordeal was to give Lord Ferdinand a hidden room in time for the funeral. Everything else was his problem.

“I shall move before the summer funeral,” Lord Ferdinand announced, then gave me the kind smile I was so used to seeing. “You have my immense gratitude for this display of generosity.”

Ah, he truly is beautiful. If only his birth and time in the temple had not ruined him. How unfortunate.

Lanzenave’s envoys had settled into their temporary accommodations, requests for meetings were flying around, and the welcoming feast was on the horizon. In other words, the castle was even busier than usual.

On the day of the feast, I started getting ready in the early afternoon. I ate a light lunch, cleansed, and got changed, which took me quite a while.

Today I was wearing a thin layer of white with a high collar that covered everything except my face beneath a blue covering adorned with gorgeous embroidery. The undergarment was covered in magic circles that relieved me from the heat to at least some degree; I would not have been able to wear anything over it otherwise.

“Your blonde hair is so gorgeous,” one of my attendants crooned while tying it up for me. “I almost wish you had never come of age.”

I covered my face with a thin lace veil. The material did not matter and was often chosen based on personal preference, but wearing one was absolutely necessary for any decent Ahrensbach woman in a formal setting.

Once prepared, I went to the hall with my retainers, feeling a combination of tension and elation. I had been underage last year, so my time at the feast had ended with the exchange of greetings. This was going to be my first time attending the entire thing.

The welcoming feast was held annually and on a small scale. Then a second, larger feast was held when the duchy’s giebels gathered for the rousing summer Starbind Ceremony. This gave them an opportunity to socialize with the Lanzenave envoys.

“Lady Detlinde has arrived,” one of the knights said as I entered the hall. Lord Ferdinand was already in attendance with his retainers, as were the other members of Ahrensbach’s leadership with theirs.

Waiting beside Lord Ferdinand were young Letizia and her retainers. Last year, we had both been sent away together, but now she would need to leave alone. I naturally felt superior as I gazed down at her.

The women in attendance were all wearing veils, while the men were wrapped in large, thin layers of cloth over their high-collared white outfits. Everyone was wearing summer colors in the Ahrensbach style... except Lord Ferdinand, who wore the colors representing Ehrenfest. It was presumably to indicate that he had yet to marry into our duchy, but it made him look entirely as though he were the ruler of the hall.

“Oh my...” I said. “I see you are not wearing summer colors,

Lord Ferdinand.”

“I did consider it, but I elected to wear Ehrenfest’s colors instead,” he replied with a peaceful smile. “I wish to make it clear that while I might give my opinion, I do not have the authority to make decisions here.”

I gave an understanding nod. One would normally wish to dress in the superior colors of Ahrensbach, so his decision was nothing if not humble. There were no two ways about it. Surely...

“Lanzenave, enter,” said the attendant by the entrance.

The doors opened wide, and in came Lanzenave’s envoys, approaching in rows. Like the rest of us, they were dressed in clothes of the Ahrensbach style; the climate of their home country was said to be nothing like ours, so they were unable to wear their usual attire during their visits. However, they were not wearing summer colors either. Instead, they were clad in silver clothes I did not recognize, perhaps to indicate their status as Lanzenave’s envoys.

Twelve envoys in total entered the hall. Six looked the same as we did, while the others had more distinct features and skin not the same color as our own. I was used to seeing them each year, but it still shocked me that such slight changes in appearance could make one stand out so much.

One of the envoys stepped ahead of his peers—a man perhaps two or three years my senior. As he crossed his arms and knelt, his young and quite frankly beautiful appearance caught my attention. I did not recognize him, which meant he had not been here last year.

The man’s hair, which was somewhere between golden and chestnut brown, was secured behind his head with a hair clip in a style that had been popular here in Ahrensbach until my grandmother’s generation. Even now, one could find older men wearing it.

“People of Ahrensbach—it is a pleasure to meet you all,” he said. “I am Leonzio, grandson of Lanzenave’s King Chiaffredo. Before the others are introduced, may I pray for a blessing in appreciation of this serendipitous meeting, ordained by the pure rivers flowing from Flutrane the Goddess of Water?”

“You may...” I answered, blinking in surprise. I certainly had not expected a Lanzenave envoy to give a noble greeting.

Leonzio also wore a feystone ring on his left middle finger, as

Yurgenschmidt nobles did. He looked upward, and a blessing fluttered out of its omni-elemental stone, which reflected his status as a royal.

Oh...?

For a fleeting moment, after seeing Lord Ferdinand for the first time, Lord Leonzio was the picture of shock. He quickly hid the expression behind a smile, but there was no denying it—for some reason, he was in complete disbelief. I gave Lord Ferdinand a quick glance to see his reaction, but I saw nothing.

Next, Lord Leonzio began introducing his fellow envoys, acting as though he had never been shocked for a moment. Most of them had come last year, the only exceptions being him and his retainers.

Once they had finished, it was our archducal family's turn to speak. The death of my late father, the previous aub, was announced, then I was introduced as his successor with Ferdinand as my fiancé. Mother and Letizia were introduced as well.

The formalities soon gave way to more casual conversation. Letizia departed with her retainers, leaving only the adults in the hall. The scholars in charge of trade and those who sought political intelligence approached the envoys with wine-filled glasses, launching into one topic after another. It was the preliminary battle before the upcoming meetings.

“Lord Ferdinand, do you not wish to join them?” I asked.

He replied with a gentle smile, “Because of my duties, I am so rarely able to be with you. I would appreciate this chance for us to spend time together.”

Pleased, I nodded. It was true that we had seldom seen each other as of late. I had assumed that Lord Ferdinand was rudely avoiding me, but he was simply busy.

Of course that was the reason. A man from a lower-ranking duchy would never look down on me.

I sipped a drink Martina had given me, in a much better mood.

“Lady Detlinde—as you are the next aub, there is something we must discuss,” Lord Leonzio began. Then he asked me when the next Lanzenave princess would be accepted. “I would normally wait until the relevant meetings, but I wish to inform my country as soon as I can.”

They would send correspondence via the trade ships passing between our territories.

Looking him in his amber eyes, I smiled and said, “We cannot

accept a Lanzenave princess. Please send word to Lanzenave as soon as you can. It would not do for them to prepare for nothing.”

“What? H-Hold on a moment. For what reason would our princess not be accepted...?”

“King Trauerqual decreed it. I am unsure what else to say...”

I recounted as much as I could remember from the recent Archduke Conference, while Lord Ferdinand supplemented my explanation from beside me. That seemed to make Lord Leonzio realize our refusal was neither a joke nor a deception. He stood in a daze for a moment, then suddenly extended a hand to me.

Lord Ferdinand smacked it away at once. “Contain yourself,” he said, his voice quiet but intense. “If you grow too emotional, I will need to summon the guards.”

Lord Leonzio swallowed whatever he had wanted to say and turned to Lord Ferdinand with a slight, peaceful grin. “Does the king of Yurgenschmidt mean to bring Lanzenave to ruin? If not, I would ask that our princess be accepted.”

I cocked my head. How would our refusal of the princess bring Lanzenave to ruin? I wanted to ask, but Lord Ferdinand put an end to the topic with a cold smile.

“Unfortunately, there is nothing we can say or do about a decision made by the Zent.”

He was so curt that I started to feel sorry for Lord Leonzio. “Lord Ferdinand, there is no need to be so cold... We should ask for more information about Lanzenave’s circumstances and pass it along to the Zent. Perhaps he will change his mind.”

Lord Leonzio appeared to relax somewhat, but Lord Ferdinand was unamused. He gave our guest an unwelcoming stare and said, “I do not expect the Zent to go back on his decree. Perhaps you should wait for a new Zent to be crowned and ask them their opinion.”

His refusal to show even a touch of warmth made me rather cross. Ahrensbach had the only open country gate in Yurgenschmidt, and our trade with Lanzenave was crucial to our country’s economy. We needed them as much as they needed us, so why would the Zent not be more considerate of their circumstances?

This is why country bumpkins who know nothing of Ahrensbach or Lanzenave are so troublesome.

I turned my head away from Lord Ferdinand with a sharp pout,

then directed a kind smile at Lord Leonzio. It was true that Ahrensbach had very little chance of changing the Zent's mind, but if we listened to Lanzenave's plight and made an honest request, maybe we would succeed. He had accepted an abnormal request from Ehrenfest, so why not one from us?

"As luck would have it, Lord Leonzio, the royal family will be visiting Ahrensbach this summer for the late aub's funeral. Perhaps you could ask the Zent then."

"Lady Detlinde, what are you saying?" Lord Ferdinand asked, looking shocked. "For security reasons, I cannot permit anyone from Lanzenave to be allowed near the royal family."

His surprise made no sense to me. "Your permission is not necessary. The royal family will decide whether to allow the meeting. Ahrensbach cannot allow the destruction of such a valuable trade partner, so I wish to hear what Lord Leonzio has to say."

"There is no need."

I was beginning to lose my temper. Once again, Lord Ferdinand was disregarding my opinion without making even the slightest attempt to understand it. I would need to put him back in his place.

"I am agreeing to hear him out. Do *not* interfere. My retainers will remain by my side, so there is no cause for concern. You might think of me as your Geduldh, Lord Ferdinand, but the jealousy of Ewigeliebe is unsightly."

Lord Ferdinand paused, his light-golden eyes wide with surprise. My accusation was correct after all.

To think he would allow such an emotion to get the better of him... What a troublesome man.

As punishment, I declared that I did not need Ewigeliebe's company and that I would take Lord Leonzio and my retinue to a separate room for our discussion. One of Lord Ferdinand's retainers asked to join us, to ensure that nothing inappropriate happened—and out of magnanimity alone, I allowed it.

I guided our group of about fifteen people to a meeting room by the hall. Then, after offering Lord Leonzio a seat, I said, "What did you mean when you said that Lanzenave might be brought to ruin?"

He paused in thought, then replied, "How much do you know about the circumstances surrounding Lanzenave's founding?"

"Your country is an important trade partner for Ahrensbach, but we are taught nothing about your history. Not even at the Royal

Academy.” I knew about the goods we imported from Lanzenave, and that was all; I took no interest in its past. My retainers struggled to mask their grimaces, but it was the truth.

“The story is not shared in Yurgenschmidt, then...”

Lord Leonzio went on to narrate Lanzenave’s past. His tale began almost four hundred years ago, during the reign of our own King Aeussewahl. The name had come up during history lessons, but I remembered next to nothing about it. Still, I politely nodded along as though I understood.

“As your King Aeussewahl grew old and it came time to choose the next Zent, there were three candidates who had obtained Grutrissheits.”

“Oh my. *Three* with Grutrissheits?” I asked, trying to swallow my shock. I had always assumed there was only one in Yurgenschmidt, and that whoever obtained it would automatically become the Zent.

“The Grutrissheit can be duplicated with one’s schtappe, no? There is nothing unusual about there being several.”

He spoke as though it were the most obvious thing in the world, so I responded with a quick, “Ah, true.” I could not let anyone know that a foreigner knew more about Yurgenschmidt than I did.

“As you know, King Aeussewahl chose King Heileind as his successor.”

That name also rings a bell. What did he do again...?

I continued to smile and nod as I racked my brain, but nothing came to mind. We had barely touched upon King Heileind in class, since he had accomplished very little of note.

Lord Leonzio continued: “One of the three candidates, Tollkuehnheit, could not accept that he was passed over. He left Yurgenschmidt with his magic tools and feystones in search of a new land.”

Tollkuehnheit had sailed through the country gate with his wife and retainers, and ended up in Lanzenave, a nation of people who were incapable of using magic. The land was impoverished but able to support life, which had been good enough for his purposes. He had used his Grutrissheit to create a foundation, then cast entwickeln to make his very own ivory city.

“The people were in awe of Tollkuehnheit, who had arrived suddenly by sea and created an entire city in an instant. They began to worship him as someone from the country of the gods, and that

was how he became king of Lanzenave.”

It was true even in Yurgenschmidt that those who obtained a Grutrissheit were worshipped as gods. I would receive the same respect once I got one of my own. For a moment, I imagined everyone’s looks of admiration and reveled in the pleasure. It was essential that I obtain the Grutrissheit posthaste.

“However, despite being worshipped as a god, Tollkuehnheit faced a serious problem: neither he nor his retinue were able to have children with the people of Lanzenave, who did not have any mana. To make matters worse, his Grutrissheit was merely a copy made with his schtappe; it would naturally be lost upon his death.”

Oh my. Is that how Yurgenschmidt lost its Grutrissheit...?

With this new information, I could guess why the civil war had started; the Grutrissheit must have disappeared after the second prince, due to become the Zent, was murdered. The first and third princes who had fought to secure it must not have known it was merely a duplicate, and now, even the location of the original was unknown.

I wonder where one goes to make copies...

Assuming that Lord Leonzio was correct, I would need to find the Grutrissheit before I could make one of my own. Surely that was feasible for someone who had activated the Zent-selecting magic circle.

“The city could at least be maintained by those registered with the foundational magic,” Lord Leonzio continued, “but that required a schtappe. Unless action was taken, it would all one day collapse. As a future aub, you understand this, correct?”

“Yes, of course.”

It was taught at the Royal Academy that one needed a schtappe to obtain foundational magic. Most of my class had considered it an unnecessary lesson, since back then, students had all obtained a schtappe in their first year, but it was a matter of grave importance for those who had magically constructed cities outside the country. The buildings would all collapse without schtappe-wielding individuals who could inherit their foundation.

“Only royals and their retainers had gone to Lanzenave, so the children they bore had plenty of mana. They also received the same education their parents had received in the Royal Academy, since the lessons were passed down to them. However, they could not obtain schtappes anywhere but Yurgenschmidt. Tollkuehnheit

petitioned the Zent to give one to his son, as there was no other way for the boy to inherit the foundational magic.”

However, the request was refused. The Zent of the time was not being stubborn or malicious; those not registered as Yurgenschmidt nobles were physically unable to acquire a schtappe.

“Thus, a tradition was born of sending Lanzenave princesses to Yurgenschmidt. Their children would be registered as nobles, obtain their schtappes, then return to Lanzenave to become its new king. The reigning Zent was concerned that Lanzenave might grow too powerful, however, so he made a contract stating that in each generation, only a single individual would return, either male or female.”

Tollkuehnheit had agonized over this. On the one hand, he wanted to preserve the Lanzenave royal family’s abundance of mana, and a baby’s mana was mostly dependent on its mother, so it was better to have a girl return from Yurgenschmidt. On the other, pregnancy would render their schtappe-wielding queen unable to use magic, which would effectively cripple the country.

Lanzenave had plenty of mana-rich women—among the retainers, their families, and their daughters—and asking for a boy to be sent back would make it easier to produce more children. So for each generation, that was what Tollkuehnheit decided to do.

“Thus, a promise between our countries was made: Yurgenschmidt would accept a princess, give her son a schtappe when he came of age, then return him to Lanzenave a king.” Lord Leonzio’s expression contorted. “Yet now Yurgenschmidt refuses to uphold our agreement?”

One could not blame him for being upset; Lanzenave was only sending us its princesses to prevent its collapse, but now we were turning them away. Even my heart began to ache. At the same time, I was furious that King Trauerqual would cast aside such an ancient promise. His streak of cruel and nonsensical decisions made me want to drag him from his throne as quickly as I could.

“Trade from Yurgenschmidt plummeted out of the blue ten years ago after a shipment of feystones, and now our princess is being refused... What are we to do?” He squeezed his hands into tight fists—and it was then that I made my resolve.

“Fear not—I will explain your circumstances to Lord Ferdinand and petition King Trauerqual in your stead. I am a Zent candidate, you know.”

Lord Leonzio stared at me, his amber eyes filled with not only shock but also hope and admiration. "A Zent candidate...?" It was a satisfying reaction, to say the least, and I gave him the kindest smile I could muster.

The next day, I promptly summoned Lord Ferdinand to a meeting. We sat across from each other at a table, then I explained the matter at hand: Lanzenave was sending its princesses to Yurgenschmidt as part of an ancient promise it had made to prevent its collapse. I also made sure to express how cruel the Zent was being for turning his back on such a long-standing agreement.

"I must ask you to explain this to King Trauerqual and get him to reconsider his stance," I announced with a smile. "Please have a plan ready in time for the funeral."

It was his job to face and negotiate with the royal family.

I had thought that Lord Ferdinand would sympathize with Lanzenave once he knew its circumstances, but he was not moved in the least. Resting his elbow on the table and his head on his hand, he watched me closely and said, "Is that it?"

"What do you mean?"

"Precisely what I said. You have focused only on what is most convenient for Lanzenave, and introduced no new information of worth. I detect nothing that would change the Zent's mind."

"Excuse me?! Lanzenave is in danger of collapse! Do you not understand the severity of not having a Zent or an aub to inherit your foundation?!"

I could not believe my ears. Had he not listened to a word of my appeal? Perhaps he was simply too thick to understand it. I shot him a furious glare, but even then, he gave a calm smile and continued to oppose me.

"Claims that Lanzenave will collapse are greatly exaggerated; its people lived perfectly acceptable lives before Tollkuehnheit showed up. If anywhere is at risk of complete destruction, it is Yurgenschmidt. Our entire country was made with mana, meaning we could very well be reduced to a desert of white sand. The only thing at risk of crumbling away in Lanzenave is the city that Tollkuehnheit built."

He continued, "Lanzenave might be in dire straits without a schtappe-wielding male, but that has no bearing on Yurgenschmidt. We gain next to nothing from accepting more princesses. Even if

their entire country were to collapse as they say, we would simply close our country gate and have it open elsewhere. We do not need to trade with Lanzenave in particular.”

I glared even more intensely. “But we do not have the Grutrissheit right now.”

“True, but it will not be long before that changes, I suspect.”

“Indeed. I am stopping at nothing in my search, but it might be some time yet before I succeed.”

It was the perfect opportunity for Lord Ferdinand to vow to support me, but he merely blinked and said, “Perhaps.” He was always so slow to react at times like this. I sincerely believed that he knew nothing about the fair hearts of women.

“You say that Yurgenschmidt has nothing to gain,” I protested, “but with our royal family being so small, would we not benefit greatly from a Lanzenave princess?”

I was so very proud of my argument, but Lord Ferdinand shook his head. “During our current crisis, we cannot risk a foreigner obtaining the Grutrissheit. You are right that a mana-rich princess would benefit the royal family in some regards, but it would also invite chaos as far as the line of succession is concerned. That is why the princess has been refused, I expect. At the very least, Yurgenschmidt cannot accept one until a true Zent has taken the throne.”

In short, the royals were scared that Lanzenave might seize control of our country in its weakened state. The way Lord Ferdinand propounded such theories and refused to even question the Zent made me sick to my stomach.

“You make a convincing argument, Lord Ferdinand, but is the truth not that you are *afraid* of standing up to the Zent?”

“Our visitors from Lanzenave simply fear losing the power that has made people worship them as gods. I see no reason why the Zent should endanger Yurgenschmidt for their sake. Plus, what kind of an impact will our decision to oppose the Zent and stand with foreigners have on Ahrensbach? Lanzenave’s royal family might lose their foothold, but the country as a whole will not collapse. The loss of their capital city will doubtless cause some cultural setbacks, but judging by that unusually shaped vessel they arrived on, they have made technological advances unlike anything seen in Yurgenschmidt.”

Lord Ferdinand continued to say everything except what I

wanted to hear. He claimed this was a good opportunity to weaken Lanzenave while Yurgenschmidt was unstable, that we needed to dye our foundation at once so that we could close the border gate, and so on.

I cannot believe he is acting so cold even now, when I am being so open about my conversation with Lord Leonzio. That he would watch Lanzenave fall to ruin simply because I forbade him from joining us is simply... Is any man more like Ewigeliebe than he?

“Lord Ferdinand,” I said firmly. “I do not want Lord Leonzio or his family to suffer. You must understand that.”

“You do not want them to suffer, but you would have us take a Lanzenave princess? I doubt the envoys said much about what happens to those women, but those who enter the villa are—”

“Whatever happens to them, Lanzenave clearly takes no issue with it. If their king desires it and the princesses come knowing their fate, then who are we to interfere?”

“Do you mean to say that the princesses who come to Yurgenschmidt deserve their fate and should accept what happens to them?” He was looking straight at me, his golden eyes betraying a painful intensity that told me he was fighting back a storm of emotions. Was it really so excruciating to him that I would support another man over the princesses?

In any case, I refused to back down. I gave a firm nod and said, “Yes. Princesses who take issue with their treatment should tell their family and negotiate with the Zent for things to be improved. Their frustrations are nothing when their entire country is at stake.”

Lord Ferdinand did not respond, but I could tell from how his smile broadened that he finally understood.

“Do make all this clear to the royal family when they arrive for the funeral.”

“Lanzenave’s so-called collapse is nothing compared to the chaos that accepting their princess will wreak on Yurgenschmidt. I side with the Zent.”

He had refused me. For a moment, my mind went blank... then my anger grew so fierce that I could no longer contain it.

“What is the meaning of this?!”

“I came to Ahrensbach by royal decree and stand in no position to support Lanzenave over the king. If you desire change, we will need to wait until the next Zent arises.”

No matter how much I shouted, his expression did not change;

he would not speak a word against the royal family while the current Zent held the throne.

"I do not care to know anyone as cold and ignorant as you!" I cried at last. "To think I must be engaged to such a brute... Leave at once. I do not wish to see your face."

"As you wish," Lord Ferdinand replied with a thin smile, then stood up and did exactly as instructed. My outrage was clearly apparent, yet he showed not the slightest hint of remorse.

THAT is the man I am expected to marry?!

I spent the rest of my day complaining nonstop about the callous Lord Ferdinand. How was I going to break the news to Lord Leonzio? I could not bear the thought of disappointing someone who relied on me, but I sent word to the building where the Lanzenave envoys were staying.

"Lord Ferdinand is positively heartless. I never knew he was so cruel," I declared upon visiting what was known as the Lanzenave Estate. I apologized for having failed to convince him, then promised to do everything I could to grant them a meeting with the royal family.

"I see you are not just beautiful but kind as well," Lord Leonzio said, his amber eyes gazing into mine. "If only we had met sooner."

My cheeks became flushed. Yurgenschmidt tended to favor delicate euphemisms, so I was not used to being complimented so directly. It certainly did not help that Lord Leonzio was so enticingly handsome. My heart pounded in my chest, I started to sense Bluanfah's presence...

Then I sat up with a start.

I cannot dance on the palms of the goddesses.

I was a Zent candidate, destined to take the throne or at least become the next Aub Ahrensbach; I could not fall in love with Lord Leonzio when I was already engaged.

"Although I appreciate your feelings, Lord Leonzio... as a Zent candidate, I cannot reciprocate them."

"Do you already have your Grutrissheit, Lady Detlinde?"

I cast my eyes down, then shook my head. "I am still searching. And, if you would keep this between us..."

I paused to give Lord Leonzio a sound-blocking magic tool. It was bad enough to openly discuss the Grutrissheit, let alone criticize the royal family. If we were to continue this conversation,

it would need to be private.

"In truth," I said, "Yurgenschmidt's current Zent does not have the Grutrissheit, and the royal family is restricting information so that nobody else can search for it. I would be able to obtain it if they would just stop obstructing me."

"I cannot believe what I am hearing... This is unforgivable," Lord Leonzio said. He was getting mad for my sake, out of concern for my future as a Zent candidate. His passion swept over me, soothing the wounds left by my fiancé and gracing me with visions of Efflorelume the Goddess of Flowers.

"Oh, Lord Leonzio..." I giggled. "How kind you are, feeling angry for my sake. Lord Ferdinand shows me no such consideration. He only seethes with jealousy."

Lord Leonzio paused, seemingly debating with himself. Then he asked one simple question: "Do you love your current fiancé?"

"It was a royal decree that bound me to Lord Ferdinand. I was unable to refuse. He is clearly in love with me, but after seeing him act so cold, I..."

I doubted that I would ever be able to love him back. Only now was it clear to me why Geduldh sought to flee from Ewigeliebe's ceaseless jealousy.

"He is someone whom I cannot escape from," I concluded. "Lord Leonzio, I must ask you to keep this a secret."

"And if you *could* escape him? Would you take my hand instead?"

"Wh-What are you saying...?"

"I do not have the schtappe of a Zent candidate, so I cannot take the throne. But I do know the location of the Grutrissheit. I could support you in your desire to become queen."

"Come again...?" I said, swallowing hard. Before me was someone who knew where to find what I was seeking and wanted to help me obtain it. What was this if not Dregarnuhr's guidance?

"If you accept me as your partner," he said, "I shall tell you where to look."

My heart raced at the thought of marrying this irresistibly sweet man. He was close to my age and, better still, not marred by the reputation of the temple. The fact he was raised in another country would create challenges, but he seemed to have received practically the same education as our nobles. Plus, being the grandson of Lanzenave's king, he was surely rich with the royal blood of

Yurgenschmidt. From where we were seated, I could even faintly sense his mana. There was a slight gap between us, but not enough to pose any problems.

“But my engagement is the result of a royal decree...” I muttered.

“If you become the Zent, the decrees of a false king will cease to hold meaning.”

A sweet scent fluttered from Lord Leonzio to me. I subtly leaned closer to him, wanting to inhale it more deeply.

“Your fiancé has done nothing to help you; on the contrary, he has actively spurned your attempts to explain our circumstances.” A gentle smile arose on his lips. “He must be soulless to have refused the heartfelt request of a woman so lovely.”

Lord Leonzio was merely repeating my earlier criticisms, but hearing them from him, I could not shake the feeling that the world agreed with me. Lord Ferdinand truly was a heartless fiancé.

“There is no need for you to be stuck with someone so cruel,” he continued. His kind words reminded me that I already intended to cancel my current engagement upon taking the throne. “Lord Ferdinand greatly resembles my uncle. He must have Lanzenave blood coursing through his veins—and if you are already engaged to such a man, what problem could there be with me taking his place?”

“You... have a point.”

“It can wait until you take the throne, but... let us be wed.” His amber eyes, so assuring and sweet, made me want to melt. “Take my hand, Lady Detlinde. I wish to make you the next Zent.”

My retainers could not tell what we were discussing because of the sound-blocking magic tool, but their expressions changed when Lord Leonzio extended a hand to me. “No, Lady Detlinde!” Martina exclaimed.

“Do not interfere,” I said, brushing aside her attempt to stop me as I stood up and approached the charming man sitting across from me. My mind was fuzzy, almost as though I were in a dream, but I was fully convinced. Letting this opportunity slip through my fingers would make my search for the Grutrissheit so much harder.

This is Dregarnuhr’s guidance. Lord Leonzio is my true soulmate, to whom Liebeskhilfe wishes to bind me.

So, my heart overflowing with confidence, I placed my hand in his.



My Hopes and Their Problems

The ordonnanz that would change my life arrived after the Archduke Conference, on my day off work.

“Lieseleta, this is Elvira. My apologies for sending this when you are not on duty, but there is something we must discuss. Could you visit my estate at fifth bell?”

After repeating its message twice more, the bird disappeared. I picked up the yellow feystone now sitting in its place, slowly blinking at the abrupt nature of the invitation, then turned to my fiancé, Lord Thorsten. We had planned to spend the day together.

“But what about our promise?” I asked.

“You have only one choice, do you not? We may meet at any time, but this invitation is from Lady Elvira. Please prioritize her over me. I will await good news.” He then began getting ready to go home, looking quite pleased.

In response, I gave a vague smile and nothing else. On the surface, he was a kind fiancé who prioritized my circumstances over his own, but the “good news” he spoke of soured my mood.

I suspect he will want Lady Elvira to arrange a meeting with Lord Bonifatius as compensation for this abrupt summons...

My meeting with Lady Elvira would almost certainly be about Lady Rozemyne’s departure; no other reasons for her invitation came to mind. Would there even be time to request a meeting with Lord Bonifatius? I already knew what Lord Thorsten sought: excessive leniency for his family who were captured during the purge.

“I am only a mednoble...” I said under my breath. “Asking Lord Bonifatius to bend the rules for a man who is not even my husband is much too great a burden...”

My sister often met with Lord Bonifatius for training, but I seldom interacted with him. I was in no position to make such a personal request, and asking for the reduction of punishments from the purge was dreadfully shameless. Even though Lord Thorsten’s family had only acted on Lady Veronica’s orders, they had still

committed their crimes. I could not help feeling that they should pay the price.

If our marriage is going to be like this, I do not look forward to the future.

It had become all too clear that Lord Thorsten, an archnoble, was only marrying into my mednoble family so that he could connect with Lord Bonifatius through my elder sister. It was exhausting that he was putting so much pressure on me before we were even married.

“My apologies again for the abrupt summons,” Lady Elvira said. “Cornelius informed me you were not working today.” She seemed eager to begin our discussion before Lady Rozemyne arrived.

We had an inoffensive conversation about Lady Rozemyne’s time at the Archduke Conference while waiting for our tea to be prepared. Then the room was cleared, and Lady Elvira handed me a sound-blocker as though it were the most natural thing in the world. The true reason for my being here was about to become clear.

“Lady Florencia is due to give birth soon, which means I will take charge of preparing for my daughter’s move. I also intend to coordinate which retainers will accompany her.”

I could tell from the look in her dark eyes that she wanted me to stay with my lady. I was glad, but I also resented my elder sister, who had managed to secure a place by Lady Rozemyne’s side simply by wishing for it.

“Because she spends so little time in the castle, Rozemyne has made do with fewer attendants than usual, no?” Lady Elvira asked. “As a result, her only attendant after the move is going to be an underage mednoble who started serving her not even half a year ago. How terribly worrying...”

Attendants were tasked with maintaining the lifestyle of their lord or lady. They were often closer to their charge than any other kind of retainer, which was why anyone who left their home duchy through marriage or for any other reason would go with their most trusted attendants. Lady Rozemyne was less fortunate, though; the only attendant due to accompany her to the Sovereignty was Gretia. It was unorthodox and, as Lady Elvira had said, worrying.

But it cannot be helped when one considers whom Lady Rozemyne keeps as her archattendants...

Rihyarda had served the longest, but she was Aub Ehrenfest's attendant first and foremost. She had even returned to his service after the purge, to help make up for the fresh gaps in his retinue. As far as attendants went, she was a unique case in that she served whomever the aub said she should. Even without the purge, she would likely never have left Ehrenfest.

As for Brunhilde, she had gotten engaged to the aub during the feast celebrating spring. Moving to the Sovereignty was not an option when she was due to become the duchy's second wife. She had much experience doing business with the royal family and top-ranking duchies, on top of her already strong socializing skills, so Lady Rozemyne truly was going to miss her.

As for Ottilie, her husband, Lord Leberecht, served as Lady Florencia's retainer. She would not be able to move to the Sovereignty unless they divorced or he started serving Lady Rozemyne instead. The former was entirely unrealistic, and the latter was unlikely when the archducal family already had so few retainers.

"It seems you do not intend to accompany my daughter, Lieseleta. Has she failed you as your lady?"

"Not in the least. I chose to serve Lady Rozemyne, and my feelings have not changed. However..."

I closed my mouth, hesitant to reveal my family's circumstances. I did not wish to burden Lady Elvira with my concerns; dealing with requests from Lord Thorsten and his family would surely be trouble enough.

"Be open with me, Lieseleta."

"I am my house's successor. And since I cannot consult my parents, my hands are tied." I could not leave my position without discussing it with Father, but as Lady Rozemyne's move remained private, I could not make such adjustments. "Furthermore, I am already engaged to Lord Thorsten, one of Lord Wilfried's retainers. Neither of our families would allow our union to be canceled."

"To prioritize love? I can arrange for your Starbinding to be brought forward to this summer so that he can go with you as your husband."

I imagined that future, then shook my head. Even in the Sovereignty, Lord Thorsten would never mesh with Lady Rozemyne's retainers. He was a noble of the Veronica faction at heart, so his presence would only burden my lady.

"I do not love him," I said, then sighed. "It would probably be best for my house if our engagement were canceled, but my family are mednobles; we could never make such a move against archnobles."

Elvira placed a hand on her cheek and gave me a look of concern. "I agree that Lord Thorsten, a member of the former Veronica faction, would not get along well with your house, which has loyally served Lady Florencia from the beginning. I expect he gave you an unreasonable demand to be carried out during this meeting."

Lord Thorsten was already using me to get closer to Lord Bonifatius, but that was not all. Anytime I sought to exchange intelligence that would close the gap between our lord and lady, he would smile and declare, "It is only natural for an adopted daughter to give away her accomplishments. Please ensure Lady Rozemyne knows this." He stubbornly clung to his opinions and showed not the slightest interest in compromising with me.

And that brazen request he made! "Ensure that Lord Bonifatius resolves my family's problems for me." The nerve!

"I wanted to cooperate with Lord Thorsten to support the future archducal couple," I said, "but things are not going as I anticipated." Our perspectives seldom aligned, and our engagement had only served to exacerbate the divide between our charges.

"So, if you will excuse my bluntness: Would you accompany Rozemyne if you could, Liesele?"

"Yes, but I am a mednoble; I do not have the socializing experience necessary to be the retainer of a princess."

Brunhilde had done business with the royal family and top-ranking duchies almost entirely on her own, and Otilie had served as head attendant during the Archduke Conference. There was nothing for me to do but oversee Lady Rozemyne's chambers and day-to-day activities—and even those tasks would ultimately fall to Gretia next year.

"Um... were Lady Rozemyne to request it, I would jump at the chance to continue serving her. But I could never act on my desires alone; I would need an order from her or someone of sufficiently high status."

"Your perspective is sound. Rozemyne always strives to respect the desires of others, but she must be taught when to voice her own desires as well."

Did she mean to say she would speak to Lady Rozemyne for me? At the thought of my wish coming true, I started to suspect this was merely a convenient dream.

“Lady Elvira, why would you go to such lengths for my sake?” I asked.

She chuckled. “I do this not for you but for Rozemyne. One cannot learn overnight how to manage her medicine or care for her when she collapses. Do you truly think I could entrust her to a single fresh-faced attendant and some Sovereign nobles who have never spent time with her before? It is my duty as the person overseeing my daughter’s departure to ensure that you stay by her side.”

Rather than feeling hurt, I was overcome with relief. If she truly was acting for her daughter, I could trust that she would not change her mind at the last moment.

“Furthermore,” she continued, “you have dedicated your life to Rozemyne, have you not? For her sake, you increased your mana to the point that you could not find anyone within your house to marry. For her sake, you strove to become a qualified doctor. It seems a waste to give up such a loyal retainer.”

I swallowed. As she had said, after witnessing the true extent of my lady’s poor health, I had elected to take the courses necessary to become a doctor. Unfortunately, because of my late entrance into Lady Rozemyne’s retinue, there had not been time for me to complete enough of them.

“To begin with, I doubted that I would actually receive the qualification. My aim was simply to build upon my medical knowledge as much as I could. That is why I did not inform anyone of my decision—not even my family or my fellow retainers. How did you find out, Lady Elvira?”

“Cornelius always pays close attention to his peers. But it was Hartmut who first noticed, it would seem.”

My choice of courses and the potions I brewed had given Hartmut enough information to deduce my intentions. I really had tried to keep them hidden, but as it turned out, not even my best efforts were enough.

“Not only was I unable to become a qualified doctor, but I still cannot brew the potions Lady Rozemyne drinks on a daily basis,” I said, looking Lady Elvira in her dark eyes. “Furthermore, as a mednoble, I will not be of any use when it comes to socializing. Am

I even worth the trouble?”

She returned my look and said, “Hartmut and Clarissa can take care of the brewing. And as for any socializing duties, those can be entrusted to the scholars—or to the Sovereign nobles who surely specialize in such work. But *you* are the only one who can protect Rozemyne’s everyday life.”

“Her everyday life...?”

“Indeed. That is the most important duty of an attendant. Rozemyne needs someone who can provide normalcy after the adoption.”

Hearing that I was not only wanted but valued so highly made a warm feeling spread through my bosom. “I shall devote my life to serving Lady Rozemyne,” I said, reaffirming my dedication.

Lady Elvira wasted not another moment—she got Lady Rozemyne to reveal that she wanted me to accompany her, then swiftly arranged a meeting with my father. As soon as he received the invitation, he came with me to Lady Elvira’s estate, whereupon the room was cleared and we were given sound-blocking magic tools. That was enough for my father to realize the severity of our discussion, and immediately his face stiffened.

“We are gathered today to discuss something very important to me,” Lady Elvira said, “so let us begin in earnest. Have someone replace Lieseleta as your house’s successor so that she can continue to serve as Rozemyne’s attendant.”

My father was taken aback. “That suggestion is—”

“You would do well to keep this to yourself, but Rozemyne is moving to the Sovereignty at the king’s request.”

Father inhaled sharply before Elvira dryly explained the circumstances: one year from now, Lady Rozemyne’s engagement would be canceled and she would move to the Sovereignty. Because she would not have any archnoble attendants with her, she would need to rely entirely on a member of the former Veronica faction who had given her name in the winter.

“I proposed that Lieseleta accompany her,” she continued, “but she had to refuse the idea, since she is expected to succeed your house and is engaged to one of Lord Wilfried’s archnoble retainers. You are the head of a family of attendants, correct? I expect you know how important they are to someone leaving their home duchy. I consider it essential that Lieseleta remain by my daughter’s side and shall do everything in my power to make it happen.”

In no uncertain terms, she had ordered my father to let me go while also offering to help with any issues my departure might cause. He cast his eyes down in thought, then looked up at me and said, "Lieseleta, do you want to go?"

"Yes," I replied, remembering how Lady Elvira had admonished my lady for not making her feelings clear. "Lady Rozemyne personally asked me to accompany her, and if our family matters can be resolved, that is what I wish to do."

"I see... Well, with Lady Elvira offering her assistance, we should not struggle to replace you. Go, if your mind is made up."

"Truly?"

"Uderick will take your place."

Uderick was a man of our house to whom I had previously been engaged. Unfortunately, our union had crumbled when we attempted to mix colors and realized that my mana quantity had grown so much that we no longer matched. Still, our house would be satisfied with him.

"Uderick was raised to lead the house as Lieseleta's husband, so there should not be any issues with him becoming the new successor," my father said, starting to relax. "To be frank, I thought Lieseleta would struggle in the position, so I am grateful this opportunity has arisen."

"Father..." I gazed down at my feet. "I am sorry that my shortcomings warranted such concern."

"Your shortcomings?" Father sighed. "No, quite the opposite. You have made *too much* progress. We are proud to have you as our daughter, but in terms of mana, the head of a house should not be so far ahead of their family. That was what I meant."

The head of a house was expected to mediate weddings and consult with family members, so a mana disparity would only complicate things. Looking back, Father had struggled to find me a partner after my mana reached a certain point.

"Of course, if Lady Rozemyne's mana compression method had continued to spread, things would have been fine," my father said. "We would have made the most of Angelica's and your bonds to Lady Rozemyne and Lord Bonifatius, and spent future generations turning ourselves into an archnoble house."

Lady Elvira nodded. "Lady Rozemyne's departure brings a swift end to that plan, unfortunately."

"Indeed. When she goes, so, too, will our connection to the

archducal family. The cancellation of her engagement will also impact Lord Wilfried, and who knows what Lord Thorsten's position might be in the future? Making Uderick the head of our house will no doubt be... important."

"Do you also want Lieseleta's engagement to be canceled?" Lady Elvira asked. "My knowledge of your situation comes only from rumors, so I would appreciate an account from the head of the house."

Father frowned, then nodded. "They have asked us to secure favors from Lord Bonifatius, which has been troubling for some time and continues to be a grave matter of concern."

Lord Thorsten's family had sought connections to the royal family through my engagement. I served Lady Rozemyne, the spiritual head of the Leisegangs, but they were mostly using me to get close to my elder sister, who was Lord Bonifatius's favorite and in need of a partner.

But as the purge saw members of the former Veronica faction punished one after another, some among Lord Thorsten's family had also been targeted. "They are your family too," my father had subsequently been told, even though my marriage had yet to happen. "Smooth things over with Lord Bonifatius."

"I spent much time with the archducal couple while their hearts ached over Lady Veronica's words and deeds," my father noted, rubbing his brow as if attempting to ease a headache. "It troubles me to no end that her faction now wants my help to escape punishment, especially when the archducal family is working so hard to right old wrongs."

"Refusing them for this long could not have been easy..." Lady Elvira said, impressed. The purge had taken place at the start of winter, and we were now at the end of spring—almost an entire half year of enduring their pressure.

"Lieseleta was at the Royal Academy during the winter, and everyone was busy here in Ehrenfest, so there was very little interaction between our houses. I was able to refuse them in the run-up to the Archduke Conference by saying that the archducal couple were lacking for retainers and overwhelmed with their preparations, so requesting a meeting with Lord Bonifatius would only serve to anger him. But now... we are finally out of excuses."

"That is why Lord Thorsten has grown more direct with his requests," I added. Then I revealed his demand that I use Lady

Elvira's abrupt summons as leverage, which made both her and my father grimace.

"Even if you do get married," Father said, "our house is going to lose its connection to the archducal family when you and Angelica leave with Lady Rozemyne. Lord Thorsten's family will no doubt bemoan that your engagement served no purpose."

The connections they had obtained at the cost of reducing Lord Thorsten to a mednoble would deteriorate, which would no doubt displease his family. Still, our mednoble house had no choice but to endure. Our fate was clear as day.

"Understood," Lady Elvira said. "In that case, I will make sure *they* cancel the engagement. In return, Lieseleta, become Rozemyne's head attendant."

"H-Her *head* attendant? But I am only a mednoble."

"You have enough mana. Simply choose an archnoble to marry and your status will increase. Many Sovereign nobles will seek to connect with a retainer in your position, and you are going to be closer to Rozemyne than anybody else."

My focus had thus far been on marrying someone who would support my house alongside me, but now... I could use marriage to become an archnoble instead.

"A mednoble from our house becoming the head attendant of an archducal family member...?" Father said, so shocked that he actually looked disturbed.

Lady Elvira merely shot him a glance before she continued: "Lieseleta, I do not mind if you need time to become acclimated to the kind of socializing expected of you, but please work hard to learn as much as you can from Brunhilde and Otilie. You will accompany Rozemyne as her adult attendant next term. Receive as much guidance as you can before then."

"Understood," I replied. "Lady Elvira, I am in your care."

"In conclusion, Lady Elvira supports the cancellation of my engagement, and a man of my house will replace me as successor. I am going to accompany Lady Rozemyne."

In our workroom at the castle, my announcement received a variety of reactions from my fellow retainers. Some stared at me in shock, while those who had been at Lord Karstedt's estate gave knowing nods.

"Glad to hear everything worked out," Cornelius said; then a

teasing smile crept onto his lips. “Rozemyne’s sure to be over the moon, especially after she made that adorable appeal for you to go with her.”

“Lady Rozemyne truly was adorable when she made that request,” Leonore agreed, giggling at the memory.

I thought back to how Rozemyne had worked up the courage to ask me despite her obvious embarrassment. “I agree from the bottom of my heart, Leonore—Lady Rozemyne was so, so adorable. I shall devote my life to serving her.”

Hartmut and Clarissa both recoiled, their expressions seeming to shout, “Lady Rozemyne asked you to accompany her?!”

She did. In fact, so did Lady Elvira.

“Cornelius...” Hartmut said, grabbing his companion by the shoulders. “I wasn’t invited to this discussion. I also wasn’t told anything about Lady Elvira vouching for Lieseleta.”

“It was a discussion about Angelica’s and Lieseleta’s futures,” Cornelius replied, brushing Hartmut’s hands away. “I don’t see why I should report anything about their circumstances or my mother’s actions to you. And do you really need to ask why we didn’t invite you? You’ve already agreed to accompany Rozemyne.”

Paying their feud no mind, I turned to Ottilie and said, “Please instruct me so that I can become Lady Rozemyne’s head attendant.”

“Certainly. To be honest, I am relieved to hear that you plan to accompany her.”

Ottilie was running me through an outline of my socializing-focused education when someone grabbed my arm out of nowhere and refused to let go.

“No! You’re so mean, Lieseleta! You bully! You traitoor! You said you would stay behind with me! Am I going to be left out again?!”

I turned to see Judithe, her violet eyes brimming with tears. It had completely slipped my mind, but she was right—I was going back on the promise we had made together.

Oh dear... How am I going to console her this time?

Inquiry into the Commotion

“Aub Ehrenfest, we are in Ahrensbach,” Karstedt said, looking down at me. “Please behave in a manner more appropriate for an archduke.”

“It’s too hot here,” I complained, sprawled out atop the sofa. “At least let me relax in my own room.”

Karstedt wanted me to speak more like an archduke—I could tell as much from the polite tone he’d affected—but I silently refused. The commotion during the late Aub Ahrensbach’s funeral meant I was being confined to my room. I was in another duchy and the funeral was over, yet I couldn’t even explore.

I grumbled and pointed at a nearby chair, urging Karstedt to sit. He sighed and shook his head, exasperated, then turned to my other retainers. The knights gave wry smiles and said, “We shall guard the aub in your place” before standing behind the sofa, leaving him with no choice but to comply.

“You can’t be that uncomfortable,” Karstedt replied, speaking more casually now that I’d drawn him into a conversation. Then he pointed at his neck. “You have the magic circle Ferdinand gave you, right?”

The summers in Ahrensbach were unbearably hot compared to those in Ehrenfest, so Ferdinand had given us a magic circle to embroider on our underclothes before the funeral. It was so exceedingly simple that one could replicate it without issue, and even a laynoble could charge it.

“I was an idiot for assuming he was becoming a more considerate person,” I groaned. “The circle must have been a cruel prank of some kind. I spent the entire funeral trying to regulate how much mana flowed into it.”

The magic circle was in fact *too* simple. Letting my concentration slip for even a moment caused me to become so cold that I thought I might freeze.

“Hah. I assume that was deliberate so you wouldn’t fall asleep during the funeral. At the very least, it saved me the usual trouble

of needing to mess around with a sound-blocker.”

It was true that during funerals and other painfully slow events, I sometimes got Karstedt to use a sound-blocker so that I could take a nap or start up a conversation when I got bored. Of course, that hadn’t been an option this time. Had I carelessly fallen asleep and lost control of my mana, I might have become the first person in Ahrensbach history to freeze to death during the height of summer.

“Besides,” Karstedt continued, “aren’t you glad you were awake? You’ll actually have something to report during this inquiry.”

“I can’t say it’s anything worth reporting. I tried to see what happened, but you got in the way.”

It really had been abrupt. Partway through the funeral, several of the black-capes near the front had stood up and started running. Not that they’d actually made it anywhere; their fellows had pinned them down in an instant. I’d tried to stand up to get a better look, but Karstedt had pushed me back into my seat and muttered, “An aub should not gawk as though this were a stage play.” The ceremony had then continued as if nothing had even happened, so to be honest, I was pretty much clueless.

“So, what was the commotion about?” I asked. “You must have seen.”

“You’ve asked a thousand times, and my answer won’t change: I’m not too sure either. I saw some knights stand up and charge, but they were caught immediately. Seemed to me that the Sovereign Knight’s Order had it all under control.”

Karstedt and the other knights guarding aubs had spent the rest of the funeral with their schtappes in hand, but nothing else of note ended up happening.

“I’m not going to have anything to tell them when they arrive,” I said. “They’ll probably spend most of the time explaining things to me.”

And even then, who knew whether they would tell me the whole truth? If something shady was happening behind the scenes, they’d explain it away with one convenient excuse or another.

“The unbearable wait sure doesn’t help. I’ve got one word to describe this: boring.”

After three days, even the ocean view from my window had grown tiresome. The water moved even when there wasn’t any wind, which was fun to watch, but knowing that I couldn’t get any

closer had made me lose interest. There was so little to do here that I'd even finished the paperwork brought from Ehrenfest.

"We just received the signal," said the guard standing by the door.

My time had finally come. I stood up right away while my attendants hurried to neaten my hair and smooth out my clothes. Karstedt stood as well and started directing those who would and would not be accompanying us.

"Ahrensbach wishes to enter."

I got my retainers to clear away the fruit and plates sitting on the table, then said, "Let them in." It wasn't long before I was face-to-face with a messenger, whom I greeted as a model aub.

Heh. Perfect.

"Aub Ehrenfest. Our sincerest apologies, but we must ask you to cooperate with our inquiry."

"At once," I replied with a gravely serious expression. "There was an incident during an aub's funeral; an inquiry is only natural."

So, with my knights in tow, I went off with the messenger.

"We have but a few questions."

The messenger had taken us to a fairly large meeting room, in which Prince Sigiswald and his retainers were waiting. That there was a representative of the royal family here came as no surprise to me. To the right of him were Ferdinand, Eckhart, and Justus, as well as some Ahrensbach scholars. If my eyes weren't deceiving me, Ferdinand was looking more refreshed than when I'd seen him in the morning.

Lemme guess... He slept during the funeral.

Justus had predicted that Ferdinand would spend all night in his new hidden room—the result of a royal decree—playing with the brewing instruments and ingredients Rozemyne had asked me to deliver. His earlier pallor had doubtless been the consequence of an all-nighter.

Feeling exasperated, I turned my attention to those sitting on the prince's other side. For some reason, Georgine was there, alongside her retainers.

Wait. Isn't that where Lady Detlinde should be, as the next aub?

She had attended the Archduke Conference as an adult, so her absence was very noticeable. Excluding her from a public meeting in the royal family's presence was as good as Ahrensbach declaring

it did not view her as the next aub.

I can understand not wanting her to be here, considering how much she's blundered, but this is just...

Such a public declaration that they didn't trust the next aub would put Ferdinand, her fiancé, in a much weaker position. It was bad enough that his wedding had needed to be postponed, so this new development made me want to grit my teeth.

I'm guessing my sister is to blame.

There was nothing stopping her from sternly disciplining her daughter, but it seemed to me that she was choosing not to. In fact... had she predicted and even started using Lady Detlinde's foolishness to her advantage? Behind the thin veil covering her face, her red lips were curled into a smile.

"Aub Ehrenfest," Prince Sigiswald said, "we must ask that you tell us what you know of the incident."

"My guards told me that several of the Sovereign knights grew violent before being taken down by their peers. But from my seat, I only saw the Sovereign knights near the front stand up."

Prince Sigiswald exchanged a look with the Sovereign knight commander. "Is that truly everything?" he asked me. "You have nothing more to say?"

"The knights who turned violent were all from Ehrenfest," the commander added. "Would you care to comment on that?"

My brow furrowed as I muttered, "So some of the emigrants went to the Sovereign Knight's Order..."

Our duchy's best had disliked my mother's methods and moved to the Sovereignty to escape her—that much was old news—but because none of them had returned or even contacted us since, we had no idea how many were living there. We were just as clueless as to whether they were knights, attendants, or scholars.

"Excuse me?" the commander asked.

"Ah, my apologies. Since I was decreed aub, the only Ehrenfest citizens who have moved to the Sovereignty have been scholars. I did not realize there were Ehrenfest knights among the Sovereign Knight's Order."

They had presumably emigrated prior to my becoming aub. Mother had told me once that the knights who had refused to serve me when my elder sister was denied the archducal seat had moved to the Sovereignty. She had also said that our duchy had no need for those who wouldn't devote themselves to me. But now, after

what I'd experienced during the purge, I saw things differently. I couldn't help thinking that the knights—the ones who had grown violent during the funeral—had given their names to my sister.

There must have been more going on with those knights than we currently know...

Maybe I was being overly suspicious, but there were more nobles name-sworn to my sister than we'd expected. It wouldn't have been at all strange for something like this to happen without my knowing.

I turned to my sister. Though her veil stopped me from being able to make out her expression, I was certain she was plotting something.

"Oh my... You are an aub, yet you do not know which of your nobles moved away?" Georgine asked. "How inconvenient for them. Have you not been staying in contact with the Sovereignty?"

I raised an eyebrow. Her tone made it sound as though she were chastising me out of consideration as my elder sister, but we had never been close; the winter purge had made me realize that more keenly than ever.

"Ehrenfest has not encountered any issues as a result," I replied, disregarding her warning. My hands were already full with my new child, renovating Groschel, and preparing for Rozemyne's departure; looking into the Sovereign nobles due to return in the winter could wait.

Hmm?

All of a sudden, I got the feeling that someone was staring at me. I glanced across those gathered and saw Ferdinand, a stern look in his eyes that seemed to shout, "You are failing to keep up appearances!" or maybe "That explanation was not good enough!"

"As the royal family is aware," I stressed, "our nobles in the Sovereignty do not return each winter, so we have not had any contact with them." This hadn't been a problem for us, but as I remembered, the Sovereignty had desperately wanted more information about Rozemyne and Ehrenfest as a whole. "Since becoming the archduke, I have sent only scholars who received Hirschur's recommendation to the Sovereignty. That we sent knights in the past is news to me."

One had to be an exceptionally talented knight to move to the Sovereignty. Chances were they had all trained under Bonifatius back when he was the knight commander. I made sure to emphasize

that I wasn't at all associated with them; no way was I going to take the heat for knights I'd neither met nor known about.

"Aub Ehrenfest, what do you think about people from your duchy causing such a serious incident?" Prince Sigiswald asked.

"As an aub, I do not have anything to say. Ehrenfest is unrelated to this matter." I wasn't going to spare a single thought for these unknown knights who weren't even my citizens.

"But they were from your duchy. Can you really claim to have no connection to them whatsoever?"

The prince wore a smile that told me he intended to drag Ehrenfest into this mess. He was silently urging me to accept the blame, but I pretended not to notice. It was better to be considered dense or a fool than wrongly be held accountable.

"I would expect my elder sister to know more about those knights than I. They left my duchy so long ago that I do not even remember them, so they must have been from her generation or older." I shot her a smile, resolved not to let her feign ignorance. It seemed very likely that the knights had given their names to her. "Did you meet them before you wed out of Ehrenfest? Or perhaps you met them in the Sovereignty while carrying out your duties as the first wife of a greater duchy."

"Oh my. How bold to voice such unfounded accusations," she replied. "In the first place, how many years has it been since I left Ehrenfest?"

"You have a penchant for maintaining relationships with nobles of other duchies; it would not be strange at all for you to have kept in contact with them in some way. I can only envy your popularity."

Rather than backing down, I pushed even further, this time hinting at the winter purge. Even now, years after her move to Ahrensbach, she had a great deal of power over Ehrenfest—more than I ever would have been able to secure in her position. I was genuinely impressed by her skill and the depth of her tenacity.

"Oh? She continues to hold that much influence?" Prince Sigiswald asked.

"It has far more to do with politics than my so-called popularity. Sovereign nobles would obviously rather be connected to the greater duchy Ahrensbach than to Ehrenfest," Georgine replied, not even attempting to deny her association with the knights. "Or at least, that used to be the case. Lady Rozemyne has

brought her duchy to a higher rank and now enjoys the royal family's good graces. Meanwhile, Ahrensbach has lost its aub and does not have anyone to replace him. Prince Sigiswald, as the next Zent, is it not clear to you which duchy the Sovereign nobles would prefer?"

"Indeed, much has changed in recent years," he replied with a nod. "Nobody could have predicted that Ehrenfest would become this valued."

Had it not been a surefire way to get me executed on the spot, I would have grabbed Prince Sigiswald and shouted at the top of my lungs, "Prince Anastasius told you to be wary of Ahrensbach, didn't he?! We warned you!"

I mean, we made it pretty damn clear that trug might be coming from Ahrensbach, right?!

Of course, my only option was to remain silent; even with Matthias's testimony and a scholarly assessment, we had no concrete evidence that trug was being used. The royal family was apparently looking into the matter, but I didn't know whether they had made any discoveries. Picking a fight with Georgine and Ahrensbach was anything but a smart move and would surely cast suspicion on Ehrenfest more than anyone else.

Hmm... Prince Sigiswald might be playing dumb to keep Ahrensbach from figuring out the royal family is onto them. Yeah, that must be it.

They wouldn't have glossed over our very clear warning. I repeated that in my head a few times, then started treating the Sovereignty with caution as well.

"We asked that the Sovereign nobles from Ehrenfest be ordered to return home," I said. "Given what has happened, however, it might be best to refuse their entry. They seem to be at risk of causing another incident."

"Aub Ehrenfest, do you mean to refuse a royal decree?" Prince Sigiswald asked.

"The order for their return was given to the Sovereign nobles, not to me. The onus is entirely on the Sovereignty." It was my roundabout way of saying that if they really wanted to send the nobles back to Ehrenfest as planned, they would need to take responsibility for them.

Next, I turned to the Sovereign knight commander. "As I understand it, this is not the first time Sovereign knights have turned violent. There was also an instance during the winter, and

those knights were not from Ehrenfest. It is clear, then, that the Sovereign Knight's Order is at fault, not my duchy. Should we not question its leadership to prevent this from happening a third time?"

"You are correct. After the first incident, we relieved the knights of duty and returned each one to their home duchy—but that was evidently too light a punishment. This time, the culprits have been executed."

"Already?" Ferdinand asked. He had been silently transcribing the inquiry since my arrival, but now there was a deep furrow across his brow. "Even though their testimonies would have been of the utmost importance?"

"Questioning them would have been a pointless endeavor. Last time, the knights merely repeated themselves as if oblivious to whatever we said. Besides, this incident was far more severe—they attacked during the funeral of an aub, while representatives of the royal family were in attendance."

"That is precisely why they should have been questioned—so that we could ascertain the cause and prevent yet another of these disasters."

I crossed my arms. Sparks were flying between Ferdinand and the knight commander. Ferdinand in particular came across as unusually harsh, considering both his expression and the remarks he was making. It seemed to me that these two knew each other from somewhere.

"I would have liked to do that, of course," the commander said, "but the next Aub Ahrensbach ordered us to promptly execute any knight who would attack the archducal family."

All eyes fell on him. Lady Detlinde had apparently declared that she would not tolerate the survival of anyone who would threaten her life. Nobody could protest her decision; archducal families were crucial to the running of the country's duchies, so attacking one was a serious crime.

Still, executing one's prisoners without even questioning them wasn't normal at all.

"In truth," the commander continued, "I started to suspect that you, her future husband, told her to give the order. Perhaps to keep the truth of this incident from ever being discovered."

"Ah, that would be devious indeed..." Prince Sigiswald added. Now they were both scrutinizing Ferdinand—the third person

from Ehrenfest to have been suspected so far, alongside my sister and me. The whole situation made me want to grimace. I was genuinely suspicious of Georgine, but from an outsider perspective, she was still associated with our duchy.

Continuing to push is way too dangerous.

We were in a bad situation. But as I tried to find a way out, one of the Ahrensbach scholars raised a hand and sought permission to speak.

“Lord Ferdinand would never do such a thing. Rather, *Lady Detlinde* is the one who thinks and acts carelessly. That is precisely why we opted to exclude her from this inquiry.”

Prince Sigiswald nodded and said, “I see. Hmm...” It was a half-hearted response at best and appeared to do nothing to stop him from suspecting Ferdinand. I could no longer suppress my irritation.

“Ferdinand, Rozemyne, and my entire duchy have bent over backward to answer the needs of the royal family. Would you still question our loyalty and view us with suspicion?” I gave him the coldest look I could muster—and it must have been effective, for his eyes widened in response.

“I am simply listening to the testimony that is provided,” he said. “Ehrenfest is under no more scrutiny than any other duchy.”

“That is a relief. If our loyalty were questioned, we would need to respond.” Perhaps that meant we would double down on supporting them, or perhaps we would run out of patience and start keeping our distance. I wasn’t going to be any more specific. Either outcome would affect Ehrenfest’s relationship with the royal family.

I’d personally like to refuse the Sovereign nobles due to return to Ehrenfest, but that might not even be an option.

My brow furrowed as I tried to determine the best means of defense. The other duchies were unlikely to be up in arms about the incident; from afar, it hadn’t even been clear what happened. The offending knights had received a swift execution, and every single one of them had been from Ehrenfest—though they’d most likely been closer to my sister than to me.

Struck by a sobering realization, I shifted my attention to Georgine. “Could it be that this incident was an attempt to prevent me from meeting the Sovereign knights?” It was hard to tell when she was wearing her veil, but I could sense that we were looking each other in the eye.

“What do you mean?” Prince Sigiswald asked.

I continued, my eyes still glued to my sister: “Just this winter, the Sovereign nobles from Ehrenfest were ordered to return home. I simply wonder if someone wished to stop that from happening.”

“Do you have any evidence for this assertion?”

“Not exactly... It’s just a gut feeling.”

The mood lightened as though I’d just cracked a joke, but I didn’t care. Something inside of me screamed that I was right. Ferdinand gave me a look that practically said, “Stop messing around,” but I knew he would gather evidence to support my hunch.

Yep. It’s just a gut feeling.

But I trusted my instincts, and anyone who really knew me understood why. They had never failed me when it mattered most. Sometimes, it even felt as though someone up above were pointing me toward the right path.

Our back-and-forth continued until the prince was finally satisfied. “Thus concludes our discussion with Ehrenfest,” he declared.

As I stood to leave, I noticed there was still a broad smile spread across Georgine’s face.

Ah. It won’t be long now before we finally settle things.

That, too, was just a gut feeling. But I could tell the time was fast approaching.

Afterword

Hello again, it's Miya Kazuki. Thank you very much for reading *Ascendance of a Bookworm: Part 5 Volume 6*.

This volume's prologue was written from Florencia's perspective. It focuses on the reports given by those from Ehrenfest between the end of the Archduke Conference and their return home, as well as the archducal couple's discussion of what happened. How did she view Rozemyne's planned adoption by the king? And what kind of an influence did she expect it to have?

The main story began with the archducal family hearing the decisions of the Archduke Conference. Bonifatius was enraged to learn that his precious granddaughter was being stolen by the royal family, Melchior was anxious about the temple handover, and Charlotte was overjoyed that she could strive toward the archducal seat again. As for Wilfried, he was overflowing with emotion. They all had very different reactions to the same news.

After being tasked with preparing for Rozemyne's move, Elvira started making all the necessary arrangements. I made sure to carefully describe how she felt about the situation and everything leading up to it, since she's supposed to be Rozemyne's "real mother" and all. I wanted to include a bit more information about her past, but it ended up feeling too out of place, so I moved it to the sixth voice drama CD's short story. Please enjoy it alongside Inoue Kikuko's passionate performance as Elvira.

After that came the handover and even more preparations for the move. Over the course of some very relaxed-seeming days, Rozemyne sorted out who would accompany her and who would stay behind. There are no good, bad, right, or wrong choices; the only important thing is that everyone follows their heart.

Way back at the end of Part 2, Dirk was a baby who couldn't even sit up on his own. Now he's approaching his baptism, and declaring his resolve to become a noble to Hartmut and the archduke! I must admit, while writing those sections, I started to get that motherly feeling of "My, how much you've grown since the

last time I saw you!”

This epilogue was written from Lutz’s perspective. It feels like quite a while since we’ve seen the world through the eyes of the lower city. It was fun to write about him meeting Tuuli for the first time after her coming of age. I was absolutely insistent that we have an illustration to accompany the moment! Lutz then returned home to speak with his mother. I made various additions to this volume to reinforce the theme of mothers and their children, so please enjoy the lower-city version of this.

The first original short story was from Lieseleta’s perspective. It contains everything leading up to Rozemyne asking her to come along to the Sovereignty—and even includes her father being indirectly ordered to let it happen. I also packed in the other retainers’ reactions to her decision.

The second short story was written from Sylvester’s perspective. This one focused on the inquiry that occurred after the late Aub Ahrensbach’s funeral. The main story showed the public analysis, whereas this short story showed what was actually witnessed. As you’ll see, Sylvester is more concerned about Georgine than the royal family. Look forward to seeing the impact of his “gut feeling.”

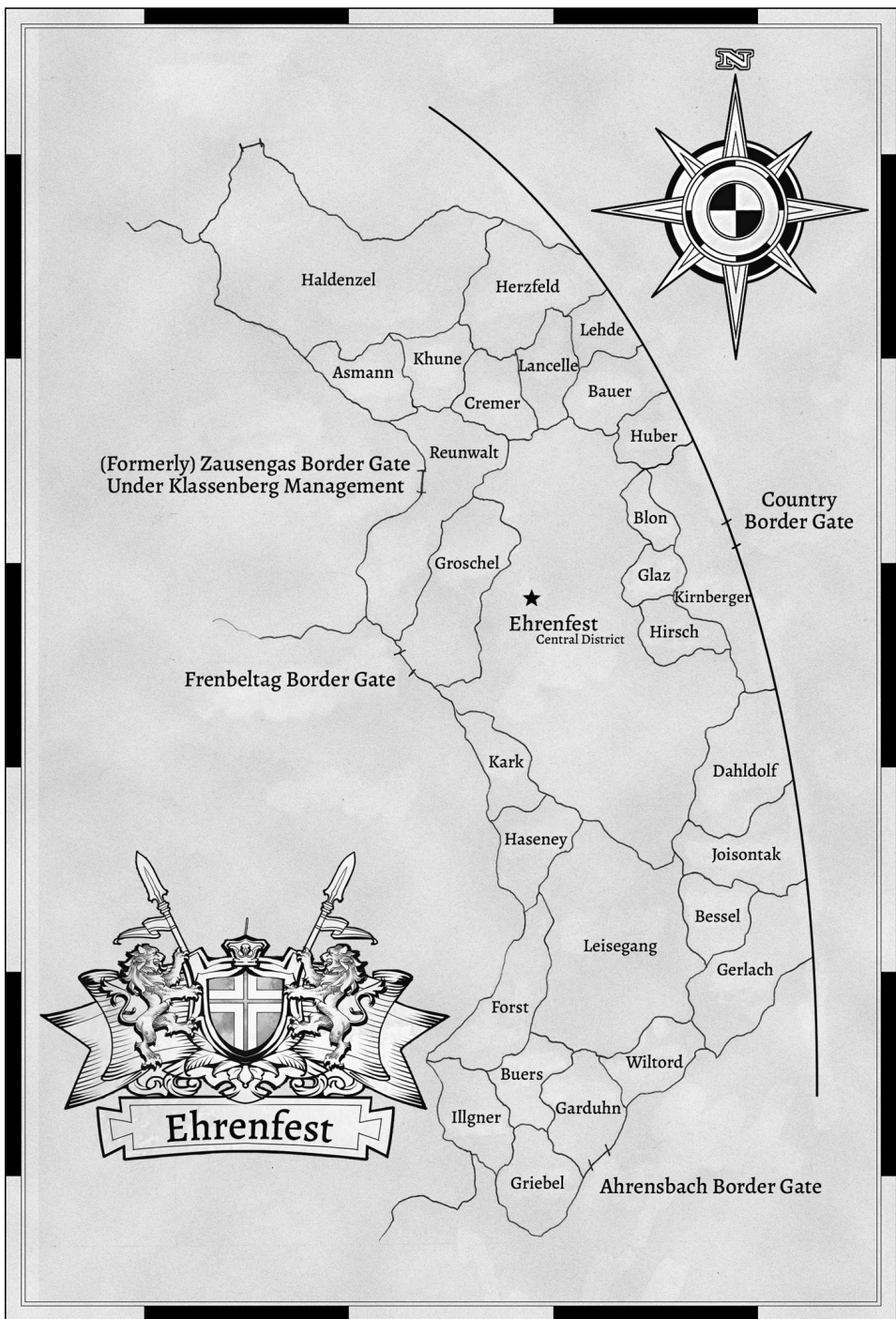
Newly designed for this volume were Lasfam and Leonzio. The former is a laynoble attendant who gave his name to Ferdinand. (This one was a long time coming.) The latter is the grandson of Lanzenave’s king. He came out even hotter than I expected, to the point that I really started to understand why Detlinde ended up being wooed... (Haha.)

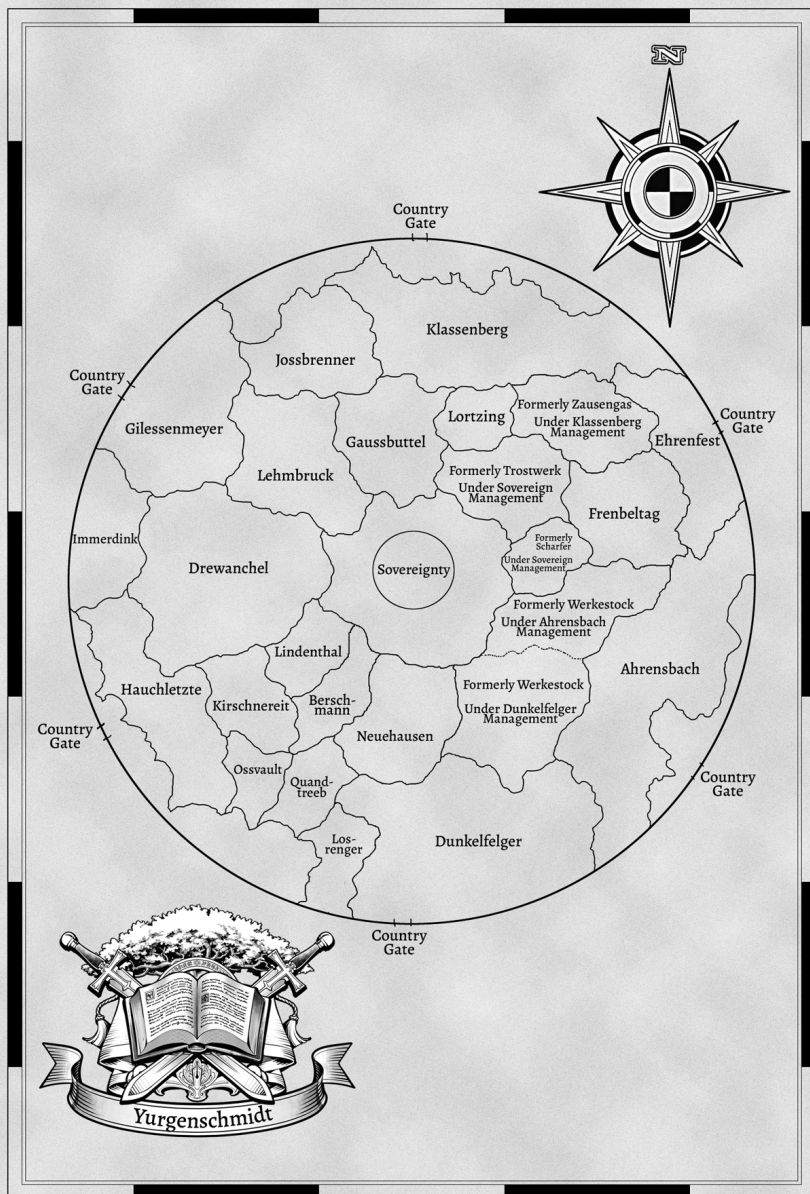
This volume’s cover art features a visualization of the discussion with Elvira. She and Rozemyne are at the front, with the retainers due to move to the Sovereignty around them. At the very top is one of the feystones marked with Rozemyne’s crest, which she gives to everyone who’s accompanying her. A few people ended up hidden behind the title block, but you can see them on the version without it.

The color illustration depicts the process of making maximal-quality fey paper. Hartmut and Clarissa have very few black-and-white illustrations despite their extremely active roles in this volume, so I made sure they appeared in color alongside Ferdinand and the letters. Thank you, Shiina-sama.

And finally, my utmost thanks to everyone who read this book. May we meet again in Part 5 Volume 7.

June 2021, Miya Kazuki



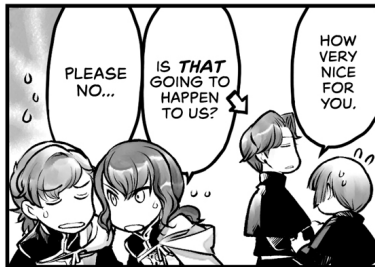
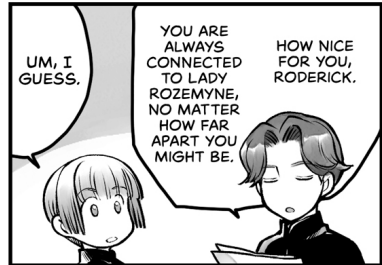


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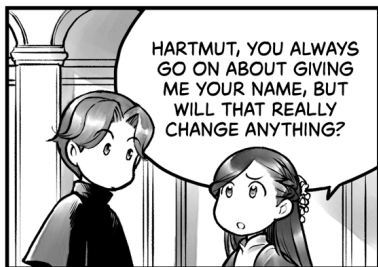
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ROZEMYNE'S TRANSFORMATION INTO BONIFATIUS CONTINUES...







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6 Ascendance of a Bookworm: Part 5 Avatar of a Goddess Volume
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